before him it was 'benevolent monarchy.'" Delighted at the spectacle of this Hollywood star calling a centrist Democrat a Commie, Nazi, and monarchist all at once, Richard Nixon issued a command to his staff: "Use him as a speaker wherever possible. He used to be liberal."

The underlying moral logic was the same. He saw good guys. He saw bad guys. Only the identity of the two precisely changed places. How? It was a shift the complexity of which he himself was constitutionally unable to convincingly explain: he said that he hadn't changed—that the Democratic Party had. That made no sense; if anything, the Democratic Party by the time he became a Republican was more conservative than it had been in 1948, when Harry Truman campaigned on a sweeping program of national health insurance. So what had changed? One crucial factor was his views on the subject of taxation—with which the president of the Screen Actors Guild had already begun a lifelong obsession.

His industry became tax-obsessed first. The new Hollywood, like the old one, was built on the manufacture of stars. But now stars manufactured themselves. Once upon a time, in 1932, Clark Gable told *Photoplay*—"smilingly," the picture magazine claimed—"I am paid not to think." Sometime later, when Gable asked for a percentage of the profits of the films in which he starred, a top executive exploded: "He's nobody. We took him from nobody.... Who taught him how to walk? We straightened his teeth and capped them into that smile.... We taught this dumb cluck how to depict great emotions. And now he wants a piece of the action? Never!" Then came the 1943 California Supreme Court decision in Olivia de Havilland's case, which called traditional studio contracts "indentured servitude"; then, postwar, aggressive Justice Department enforcement against the monopoly practices forbidden by the 1940 Paramount decree; then the labor troubles of 1945–47, eating away at studios' bottom lines. There was, too, the rising medium competing for Americans' entertainment dollars: television. The studios' hand thus weakened, stars making Gable's old demand had considerably more power. This was, ironically, the reason Reagan became SAG president in the first place: Robert Montgomery was one of the first to get a newfangled "profit-sharing deal." That, officially, made Montgomery "management"—and thus disqualified him for union office. This was something his replacement, with far less box-office pull, wouldn't have to worry about.

The new deals made Hollywood stars entrepreneurial, at a time when the Revenue Act of 1941 set the top income tax bracket at 90 percent for every dollar earned above $200,000. So stars started thinking like Republicans: They became tax-obsessed. Indeed, the story Reagan would tell about why he became interested in taxes revolved around that 90 percent top marginal tax rate: he claimed it kept him from adding a new picture to his schedule if it meant getting paid only a dime on the dollar. The story, however, doesn't wash. Reagan was still a contract player, not a freelancer—and still a rather meager contract player at that. In April 1949, when a melodrama of his he thought splendid, called *Night Unto Night*, came out after being held for two years, he confidently refused a loan-out to Columbia for a silly comedy. But *Night Unto Night* got bad reviews. Next *Variety* gave him a good notice ("Reagan is a fellow who has a cheerful way of looking at dames") in *The Girl from Jones Beach*—but the picture was just the sort of fluff he was desperate to avoid. He had done Warners a favor the previous year by filming the war picture *The Hasty Heart* in cold and damp England (the cash-strapped British government had frozen American corporate assets, forcing studios to film more pictures there)—but Warners repaid him by scheduling him in only one picture for the next year.

Early in 1950 a black-tie dinner for his thirty-ninth birthday drew six hundred attendees, including Cecil B. DeMille. Al Jolson sang "Sonny Boy" to the guest of honor. Perhaps buoyed by that, Reagan wrote Jack Warner a letter—addressing him as "Dear Jack" and calling in what he thought was a chit. "You agreed that the script and role were very weak but asked me to do the picture as a personal favor which I gladly did," he wrote of *That Hagen Girl*. "At that time," he pushed, "you encouraged me to bring in a suitable outdoor"—Hollywood jargon for "adventure"—"script which you agreed to buy as a starring vehicle for me." He then noted a rumor that the Western script the studio had purchased on that recommendation had been reassigned to Errol Flynn. He concluded, "I know you too well to ever think you'd break your word. However I am anxious to know something of production plans—starting date etc. in order to better schedule my own plans. Frankly I hope it is soon as I have every confidence in this story."

"Jack" responded through the studio's chief legal counsel: "Maybe it would be a good idea to effect a mutual cancellation of your contract."

Lew Wasserman was able to cobble him a five-picture-a-year-deal at Universal—a second-tier studio that cast him in his most infamous humiliation. Of *Bedtime for Bonzo*, *Newsweek* opined, "The chimp behaves more credibly than Ronald Reagan." His name was even mispronounced in the trailer. He turned down the sequel, not because of any worries about tax liability, but because he thought the script unrealistic. ("Who could believe a chimp could go to college and play on the football team?" recollected the star of a picture in which the chimp

wears glasses, learns table manners, and is adopted as a child by a professor and his wife.) No, this wasn't an actor worried about the tax liability of winning too many roles. In any event, by then a business genius had figured a way out of the 90 percent tax bracket problem. When a studio really wanted a certain actor for a certain role, Lew Wasserman, Reagan's own agent, invented profit-sharing deals that turned the actor into a "corporation," whose stake in a picture could then be taxed at the capital gains rate, a mere 25 percent. But that was only for stars. Wasserman wasn't able to get Reagan any decent pictures at all, on any terms.

The future champion of individualism and entrepreneurship despised the new, more individualistic, entrepreneurial Hollywood. As SAG president, he was obsessed with preserving the factory system: guaranteeing actors "a wage that'll enable them to live during the lay-off periods"; begging the studios in 1950 to re-balloon the number of actors under contract back to more than seven hundred from the current number, 350; arguing in 1952, his last year as SAG president, that by "casting and concentrating on a small group of individuals, who happen to be temporarily 'hot,'" the studios harmed only themselves. (Projecting blame onto the industry for problems he was suffering in his own career was a pattern of his in interviews.) He all but proposed featherbedding make-work for the 5,242 SAG members who made less than $300 a year. (He noted that only 139 members grossed more than $50,000 a year—a point inconsistent with his later argument that the exorbitant top marginal tax rate for those earning over $200,000 was devastating Hollywood.)

The new Hollywood, in fact, was killing him. To keep him working, Wasserman had to search elsewhere within his burgeoning entertainment empire. "REAGAN IN NIGHT CLUB / BUT NOT FROM CHOICE / ACTOR CITES PROBLEMS" reported the newspaper *Hollywood Citizen* in 1954, announcing his debut as emcee at the Frontier Hotel in Las Vegas, "despite the fact that he is no singer or dancer and could scarcely qualify as a comedian." His costars were an act that specialized in the hardly cutting-edge arts of soft-shoe dancing and barbershop quartet singing. Rounding out this uninspiring evening of entertainment, the *Citizen* reported, was a "monologue such as he has delivered at countless benefits." Reagan was just grateful for the opportunity—which came, he wrote to Lorraine Wagner on the Frontier's Western-themed stationery, at "about the time when I thought I was going over 'Niagara Falls' in a tub." He also told her the show was "going over real big and the whole thing is really a grand experience." For Ronald Reagan everything always works out in the end, gloriously, even when it does not. His Las Vegas agent described the revue as an "omelet." Having laid that egg, Reagan soon was out of work once again.

This does not sound like a man realistically worried about the tax penalties of taking on extra work. His obsession with the unfairness of the IRS may be better explained by a secret that came out only after his death. A researcher discovered a tax lien against Reagan in the amount of $24,911 (some $200,000 in inflation-adjusted dollars), apparently related to income he had deferred during World War II, when he was pulling down only $280 a month. Who knows what frustrations, during this most frustrating period of his life, lay behind that? What endless phone calls with IRS bureaucrats, what tortured discussions with accountants, what fears that this man for whom appearances counted for everything might be found out? Who knows. If he ever talked about it, no one ever told.

Perhaps he talked about it with Lew Wasserman. Wasserman, though nominally a Democrat, was Hollywood's preeminent tax-hater. Gaming the IRS was at the heart of his business genius. MCA had an "incredibly complicated structure," wrote a biographer, "with ultimately more than two hundred subsidiaries incorporated in many different states as well as abroad." In one dodge, Wasserman figured out that if his clients did all their work outside the country for at least eighteen months, they would receive all their income tax-free; in another, he decorated MCA offices with antiques on which the company claimed depreciations, even while they were gaining in value.

Reagan had always sought older mentors, surrogate fathers; now here was something to more deeply bind him to Wasserman, And he would soon find his animus toward the IRS resonating with a new social circle. That came of a new romantic relationship—the next station in his ideological *Wanderjahr*.

THERE ARE SEVERAL STORIES ABOUT HOW RONALD REAGAN MET AN actress, new in town in the fall of 1949, named Nancy Davis. In one version, both attended a dinner party at the home of Dore Schary, whose back her physician stepfather had once fixed. Schary pooh-poohed the seriousness of the Communist threat; Reagan vociferously argued otherwise. Nancy, seated opposite, "kept smiling at him in agreement." In another, Nancy Davis tried to run for the Screen Actors Guild board but was left off the ballot owing to confusion involving another "Nancy Davis" on the membership rolls. In still another story, Davis kept a

list of Hollywood's most eligible bachelors whom she wished to woo: actors, lawyers, agents, producers, power players every one—and the Screen Actors Guild president topped the list.

Ronald and Nancy, however, always told still another version. Theirs was a story of rescue.

The story went that a list of Communist sympathizers was published in the *Hollywood Reporter*. "Nancy Davis" was one of them—again, a different Nancy Davis. Director Mervyn LeRoy asked Reagan to meet with her to help clear up the matter. That would have been consistent with Reagan's immersion in a new aspect of film colony culture: the evolving bureaucracy by which accused Communists and sympathizers were ritualistically "cleared" of suspicion. It was a sordid and arbitrary process—for instance, in the case of Alexander Knox, the actor Reagan named to the FBI after Knox mocked him at a SAG mass meeting. Suddenly Knox found himself having to answer fantastic and foundationless charges: that he had attended a meeting at a left-wing bookshop he could not recall entering in his life; that he had protested against the American Nazi Gerald L. K. Smith at a meeting of the Hollywood Independent Citizens Committee of the Arts, Sciences and Professions (he hadn't, though he wondered what was wrong with protesting against a Nazi, and also hadn't belonged to HICCASP); that he had signed a petition asking SAG to review its neutrality policy in the jurisdictional strike (he had, but was baffled as to why that made him a suspected Communist); that he had signed a full-page ad protesting HUAC's investigation (he hadn't). It didn't matter: Knox was unable to make another movie in America until 1967.

Neither Ronald Reagan nor Nancy Davis, however, found the clearance regime sordid. For them it was a prop for a gauzy, romantic fairy tale—like finding the maiden for whom the slipper fit. They met over dinner, where the gentleman agreed to save the damsel from distress. They moved on to the nightclub Ciro's, where they partied into the night. Then, wrote Nancy in her autobiography, "We had dinner the next night and the night after that." They "went together," she wrote, "for about a year."

It was more like two and a half years. And in any event, their story wasn't factual on its face. The mix-up with another "Nancy Davis" believed to be a Red took place not in 1949 but in 1953, when she and Reagan were already married and he was no longer a SAG officer. It was Louella Parsons, not Reagan, who cleared her from the taint. But Nancy Davis had no less a taste for tidying up stories than the man who would

become her husband. The truth is that Ronald Reagan *did* rescue Nancy Reagan—who had developed a taste for being rescued since she was a girl.

Her mother, Edith Luckett, had been an itinerant actress whose first husband was a serial failure. They divorced. Edith refused alimony, struggling to raise her daughter alone while she trod the boards up and down the Eastern Seaboard; when that became too much, she left Nancy with her sister's family in Bethesda, Maryland. There Nancy was able to grow up with a double dose of glamour: at Sidwell Friends, the exclusive private school of the Washington elite (though her foster family was poor, and she always had to share a room); and visiting her mother on the road, where she mingled with the likes of Spencer Tracy and the exotic silent film star Alla Nazimova (her godmother), swaddling herself in Edith's dazzling costumes.

In 1927, on a cruise to join a production in England, her mother met a taciturn Chicago professor of medicine, Dr. Loyal Davis, scion of one of the oldest families of Galesburg, Illinois. When Dr. Davis proposed marriage, Edith traveled to Bethesda for a rare visit with her daughter to seek her approval—promising that upon her marriage, she would bring Nancy to live with them in Chicago. Nancy approved. In short order Dr. Davis became a progressively more important figure in Chicago, rising to chief of surgery at Northwestern. Edith landed an easy role on a radio soap opera, contributing to the family's increasingly ample income. Nancy was enrolled in Chicago's toniest high school, Girls Latin. (The caption beneath her photo in the 1939 yearbook read, "Nancy's social perfection is a constant source of amazement. She is invariably becomingly and suitably dressed." In fact she was always afraid her classmates would think she had a weight problem.) Their Lake Shore Drive home became the center of a social whirl: Chicago's towering mayor Ed Kelly was a regular; the legendary Walter Huston was "Uncle Walter"; family friends like Mary Martin, Lillian Gish, and Katharine Hepburn flitted by. Vacations were at the sumptuous Arizona Biltmore.

At age sixteen, Nancy made the rescue legal. She was invited by her biological father, Ken Robbins, and his new wife for a visit. They quarreled; he locked her in a bathroom. Returning home, she asked a retired judge about how she might go about being adopted by her stepfather. She filed the petition herself. Decades later, a reporter confronted her: *Who's Who* said she had been adopted. Her official biography as first lady of California said she "was born in Chicago, the only daughter of Dr. and Mrs. Loyal Davis." She replied, "I don't care what the book

says. He is my father." She repeated herself: "In my mind, he is my father. I have no father except Loyal Davis."

In Chicago, Dr. Davis, whom even his grandchildren would later call "sir," was infamous for his conservatism. How conservative? A story about medical interns who prevailed upon the parents of babies they delivered in charity cases on Chicago's black South Side to name their sons "Loyal" to snub their racist boss sounds apocryphal. The one about syphilis has more of a ring of truth: Dr. Davis, suspecting that a well-to-do patient had a tumor, turned the case over to two medical students, who did a positive test for the venereal disease. They were shocked when he responded to their presentation of their findings by imperiously pronouncing: "My patients don't have syphilis."

"My patients don't have syphilis": that unbendable will to divide the world into the virtuous and the wicked, never the twain shall meet—a family trait. Though at that, once Nancy loosed herself on the wider world with the ambition to become an actress, a crisis developed: she found herself on the wrong side of that particular divide. Which was where the need for her rescue came in.

Nancy Davis majored in drama at Smith College, then struggled to make it as an actress on Broadway. She did better in her social life. Spencer Tracy suggested Nancy as a date for his widowed friend Clark Gable when Gable traveled to New York. Gable ended up squiring Nancy around town for three straight days. "Nancy was one of those girls whose phone number got handed around a lot," a contemporary recollected. She developed what used to be known as a "reputation."

It is hard to put a polite coloration on what happened next. One of the men given her number—"She's a nice girl who likes company," he remembered being told—was the head of casting at MGM. Benny Thau was fifty-one; she was twenty-eight. Before the evening was out, he invited her to come to Hollywood for a screen test. However, he later expressed severe reservations about her talent: "Stars like Elizabeth Taylor, she couldn't compete with that. She was attractive, but not what you'd call beautiful." Nancy Davis appeared to have a guilty conscience about the coup; she told her mother she earned that screen test after someone at MGM saw her in a television play.

The screen test was directed by MGM's legendary George Cukor, and filmed by the studio's best cinematographer, George Folsey; it followed, on Benny Thau's order, three weeks of training from the studio's drama coach. "All Nancy Davis had to do," an MGM producer later told a scandal-mongering biographer, "was show up . . . and not upchuck on camera." She signed one of those seven-year contracts they

weren't giving out very many of in March 1949. On her studio publicity questionnaire, asked what she would do if not acting, she answered, "Lord knows!" She said her greatest ambition outside her acting career was "to have a successful happy marriage." However, the social mores of the time would make that ambition difficult. She was twenty-eight, older than the ideal marriageable age. And there were those delicate stories that began to circulate around town, in which she left the offices of powerful men at odd hours . . .

Then she met a man who lived to rescue, who treated her like a queen, swaddled her in innocence, and gazed upon her with nothing but reverence for the rest of their lives.

As their romance blossomed, Ronald Reagan was embarked on a crusade against Hollywood gossip. One consequence of the softening of Old Hollywood's autocracies was more autonomy for the fan magazines that once had been all but adjuncts for the studio publicity shops. In February 1951, emceeing *Photoplay* magazine's annual awards show, he shocked the assembled luminaries by saying from the podium, "We as an industry have suffered from irresponsible journalism." The *New York Times* published an article on the controversy that followed. On a TV show he argued that the only reason newspapers ever began reporting on movie stars in the first place was as "a circulation gimmick," as if studio publicists did not exist; then, in the same interview, he said that "the anxiety of studio press departments for publicity" was the source of the problem. Thereupon he blamed Hollywood's box-office woes on media gossip—and concluded with a right-wing fillip: that such gossip threatened the "rights of a private industry to go on and maintain itself." Now he was in those fan magazines' sights—those magazines that had made his career. The editor of *Motion Picture* disemboweled him in an open letter: "You cited fan magazine stories about your divorce from Jane Wyman as 'false and irresponsible invasion' of your privacy . . . you apparently didn't feel the marriage itself was a private affair in 1943 [when] our photographers were permitted to take all the pictures they wanted of your home, your wife and your family, and in 1941 you talked freely to our reporter concerning your expected baby, and posed buying toys, baby powder, and bassinets." Reagan sent an angry several-page open letter in return. But *Motion Picture* would not publish it.

This was not how Hollywood as he understood it was supposed to work. Perhaps, with Nancy, order could once more be restored. "They go as 'steady,'" ran a fan magazine item on the courtship, "as any couple in Hollywood. . . . For Ronnie, whose last wife was bored by his serious attention to union matters, etc. Nancy's a good listener."

"REAGAN WILL WED SOCIALITE," was how the nuptials were announced in one news clip. They married on March 3, 1952, in a little private ceremony with William Holden as best man and his wife, Ardis, as matron of honor. It was a nice Hollywood contrivance: as a general rule, the Holdens were not speaking to one another at the time.

NANCY HAD HOPED TO SETTLE DOWN AS A HOUSEWIFE. BUT REAGAN GOT only three pictures in 1952; they had a mortgage on a home overlooking the ocean in the tony suburb of Pacific Palisades, another on the ranch bought the previous summer (350 acres in some accounts, 600 acres in others; it was actually 236), payments on a green Cadillac convertible, child support. They also soon had a new child, Patricia Reagan, born seven and a half months after their nuptials. At that potential scandal, another Hollywood contrivance was generously provided by Louella Parsons: "They were at the horse show Monday night when Nancy was taken directly to the hospital," she columnized. "The baby wasn't due until Christmas." (Actually, Patricia had been conceived before they were married. "My parents have never gone for simple, state-of-the-art lies," she wrote. "They weave bizarre, incredulous tales and stick by them with fierce determination.") So Nancy supplemented the household income by playing in a sci-fi groaner called *Donovan's Brain* and doing ads for Blue Bonnet margarine. ("Mrs. Ronald Reagan, popular wife of the famous movie star, is a winsome socialite of Pacific Palisades, California. . . .")

She did not care for ranch life—though for the sake of the columnists, she made do: "Here Ronnie and his wife, Nancy (Davis), get into blue jeans and tend to the cattle and horses, milk the goats, feed the chicken, and have the time of their lives." That piece, which ran in the *Los Angeles Examiner* at the end of June 1952, was slugged "NICE GUY REAGAN FIGHTS FOR WHAT HE BELIEVES IN" and noted, "His interest in civic and state affairs is so keen, a group of California citizens recently invited him to run for senator. He turned it down with thanks. 'I'm a ham—always was and always will be,' he laughed." It did not note that the citizens were Republicans, and included car dealership magnate Holmes Tuttle, who was at least as conservative as Loyal Davis.

Reagan had just delivered a commencement address at a Disciples of Christ college in Missouri, a curiously nervous performance. "This is a role which, believe me, I approach with more fear than any role I have played," the seasoned podium pro began, before moving on to several disjointed, self-effacing anecdotes and winding up with a series of patriotic bromides—*as if what he currently believed was not clear at all, for the first time in his life.*

ONE MONTH LATER HE WOULD DELIVER SOMETHING ELSE: A LEGAL DOCument, signed by him in his capacity as union president, granting MCA exclusive right to ignore a crucial Screen Actors Guild rule: a ban on agencies producing TV shows. It was a conflict of interest, because agents had the obligation to get their clients paid as much as possible, and producers had an interest in having them paid the least. But Lew Wasserman saw television as his next gold mine, and he wanted in.

There were 1,126 times more televisions in American homes than there had been in 1946. Studio bosses feared the infernal machines like the plague (for a time Jack Warner banned them as set dressing in Warner Bros. films). Hollywood actors came to fear them, too. "Thousands of hours of entertainment must be available to the television public," the *Saturday Evening Post* reported early in 1952, "and any guess as to where it will come from is as good as another." TV production was almost exclusively done in New York, live, instead of in Los Angeles, where shows were shot on film. If TV shows were filmed, producers were worried that actors would demand payment every time a show was rerun—what was known as a "reuse" payment; producers adamantly refused to even entertain the idea of reuse payments. In Los Angeles, these were perilous times: If actors held the line and continued to demand them, and movies continued to lose market share to TV, Hollywood as an institution might shrivel at an alarming rate.

Within this matrix, Wasserman spied a bonanza business opportunity. He set up a TV production subsidiary in Los Angeles called Revue—this was, on its face, against SAG rules. Wasserman, however, convinced his favorite client to sell the SAG on the idea of granting MCA a "blanket waiver" of that rule. Wasserman and his lawyer Laurence Beilenson sold the idea to Jack Dales by arguing that the acting game in Los Angeles would die without it—that TV production would stay in New York. But the argument didn't really make sense. For if letting one agency have a blanket waiver, as a monopoly, might open the floodgates to Hollywood TV production, wouldn't it help Los Angeles all the more to let all agencies enjoy the same right?

It made more sense when you considered the sweetener MCA added to the deal: a secret quid pro quo. Revue would give SAG what the studios adamantly refused to grant: reuse fees. How secret was that part of the deal? It may have even been kept from Reagan, who seemed quite

in earnest when, asked at a 1962 hearing on MCA's alleged monopoly power, said there was no quid pro quo. At that, a letter from Beilenson to Wasserman recollecting the secret terms—that Revue was willing to sign a contract giving the guild members reuse fees when no one else was willing to do so—was read out. Reagan was asked the question again. He replied, guilelessly, "It's quite conceivable then if he says it in this letter." By that time, Revue was so gigantic that MCA had a direct hand in the production of 45 percent of all network shows.

Maybe Reagan really didn't know that the deal was dirty. Maybe he just convinced himself of his friend and benefactor's incorruptible character. As usual, in those he believed innocent, innocence was all his eyes saw. It was his gift. In any event, he soon would be delivered a gift from Wasserman in return.

THINGS WERE LOOKING UP. IN 1953 HE FINALLY GOT A SCRIPT THAT HE loved—an "outdoor" script. *Prisoner of War* was based on the headlines: POWs held by the enemy in the Korean War had just been repatriated after reportedly ghastly torments and tortures. But some had elected not to come home at all—professing loyalty to the Communist cause. The development brought on great drafts of soul-searching, an anguished national conversation about whether the Communists had mastered the power of "brainwashing"—diabolically rewiring men's entire personalities. This picture had been written with the help of a technical advisor who'd been a North Korean prisoner. It began with our hero, Webb Sloane—Reagan—volunteering to parachute behind the lines to enter a prison camp. There he sees prisoners suffering in excruciating stress positions, confined naked in open holes in the ground, and subjected to cruel psychological manipulation like mock executions. Some respond with selfless heroics. ("Confess to germ warfare or you'll never see your wife again!" says the evil Russian colonel in the blazing white tunic. "PETER REILLY, LIEUTENANT, OC806032," a hero responds every time.) Others thought themselves clever for appearing to cooperate in order to earn favors like drugs for a suffering fellow prisoner. Reagan's Sloane berates a soldier for this. Then, in a twist, he changes sides, pronouncing himself a persuaded "progressive" now. This was a spy's ruse, of course, giving him access to the tools to get word back home about just how diabolical the Communist torture regime truly is.

Here was a key to Reagan's pleasure in the film—its vision of American innocence. *Prisoner of War* implicitly proposed a theory, one set to ease all that anguished national soul-searching: maybe, just maybe, those handful of defecting soldiers, rather than exposing the weakness of America's will, confirmed its strength. Maybe the defectors actually were spies, infiltrating the enemy and acting above and beyond the call of duty. Maybe America's will was greater than we had ever dared dream. "The spirit of man can run deep," ran the movie's opening invocation—"far beyond the reach of Communist torture."

That theory, though, didn't help at the box office. *Prisoner of War* came out in the spring of 1954 to lukewarm business. Some reviewers questioned the premise (the *Christian Science Monitor* referred to "atrocities supposed to have been practiced on prisoners"). Others found the execution slapdash and absurd. (Why did the torments never seemed to disturb the actors' perfectly coiffed hair, nor their exquisite physiques?) Reagan was flummoxed. "The picture should have done better," he said disappointedly. Americans had just been presented a portrait of real-life heroism on their screens. And yet they rejected it. Something was wrong. He blamed "the reluctance of extreme liberals to enthuse about anything that upset their illusion about 'agrarian reformers'"—the term of endearment used by those duped that Communists were actually humanitarians.

He was still not a convinced man of the right. In the spring the Army-McCarthy hearings dragged the disapproval ratings of the red-baiting senator from Wisconsin to a record low 45 percent. The nation was now neatly divided between those willing to believe the Communist conspiracy could be present anywhere, capable of subverting anything—and those who found the former group guilty of the same kind of thinking we were supposed to be fighting. That fall Reagan planted his flag with the latter group. "Professional patriots," as he angrily dubbed them, had targeted the United Nations Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as a vector of Communist indoctrination. In Los Angeles, the school superintendent, Dr. Alexander Stoddard, introduced UNESCO study materials into the schools. Stoddard had been the scheduled speaker at a dinner marking the hundredth anniversary of the school system in Schenectady, New York, where the corporation General Electric was based. Then he fell to a heart attack. Reagan, who happened to be in town, was drafted to speak in his place—attributing Stoddard's collapse to "the vicious attacks of the ultra-professional patriotic organizations that can eventually wreck our school system."

He was, however, about to round the final ideological bend—making much the same vicious attacks himself. The development came largely of that gift from Lew Wasserman and MCA.

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THE PRESS RELEASE WENT OUT APRIL 4, 1954, WHILE HE WAS STILL EMceeing his feeble Los Vegas nightclub act: "NEW 'GENERAL ELECTRIC THEATER' SERIES STARTS IN SEPTEMBER WITH RONALD REAGAN AS HOST." The show was the first major product of Revue, MCA's new TV company, which was enjoying its blanket waiver to produce the very shows whose talent it represented as agents. "There was much talk around Hollywood about how Reagan had managed to land this fancy new job, which resurrected his career," Wasserman's biographer wrote. "The connection was hard to miss." Though it also had to be said that he was a natural for the job. In its first year, before Reagan's arrival, *General Electric Theater* ranked nineteenth in the Nielsen ratings. Within four months it climbed to tenth, and in the next year it scored third. It beat its Sunday night competition *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* and *The Ed Sullivan Show* consistently for the duration of Reagan's run as its host.

What he was hosting was an "anthology" show—one of those 1950s relics in which a completely different cast of actors each week played in a completely different mini motion picture, in a bewildering array of genres: light comedy, Westerns, Hitchcock-style thrillers, miniature sword-and-sandal epics, family melodramas, slapstick, and more, sometimes starring actors on their way up (James Dean), sometimes those on their way down (Bette Davis), though more often actors who would never be much known at all. What held the crazy quilt together was the host: a "continuing personality on which to hang the production and advertising of the show," as Reagan described it to an interviewer. Sometimes he was an actor in the productions, but he was always there as each episode's introducer, frequently in the same jaunty lean over the TV lights that featured in his 1937 trailer for *Love Is on the Air,* and projecting that same customary aw-shucks ease—and almost always with a trademark puffy silk handkerchief protruding from his suit coat.

He starred in GE commercials, too. The short ones. (A shock of lightning crashing across the screen, punctuating the words rushing at the viewer: "IN THE HOME . . . ON THE FARM . . . IN RESEARCH . . . IN ENGINEERING . . . IN MANUFACTURING SKILL . . . At General Electric, progress is our most important product!") The long ones, which were a *GE Theater* innovation. Instead of the standard stretch of thirty- or sixty-second spots dotting the program, each episode featured a sort of halftime intermission, a mini General Electric documentary.

"That was act one of 'Big Break,' starring Johnny Ray with Nancy Gates," Reagan twinkled in the middle of one show, about a pop singer who refused to give up his ethnic surname and sing teeny-bopper songs as his record label demanded ("My great grandfather was Pulaski . . . the finest cabinet maker in all Warsaw. . . . I won't change my mind, sir. Not about this"), is fired, then is begged to come back. ("I'll go back. And I'll stick it out. But this time as Johnny Pulaski!")

"Now for a story with a twist, our Progress reporter Don Herbert visits another company, not General Electric—but one in which General Electric is very interested!"

Thereupon the viewer got to tour one of six Junior Achievement companies sponsored by the General Electric Foreman's Association at the twenty-thousand-worker turbine plant in Schenectady, New York: kids capitalizing their own company by selling shares of stock, forming a board of directors and a managerial cadre directing a happy crew manufacturing magazine racks for sale on a veritable production floor. "General Electric employment groups sponsor 68 Junior Achievement chapters in 34 communities. And it's no surprise. General Electric as a company, and its men and women as individuals, have always been interested in building a better America, with and for our young people. For today's youth will bring tomorrow's progress. And at General Electric, progress is our most important product!"

That vignette was a perfect portrait of Ronald Reagan's new corporate benefactor's vision of the world. Few corporations were as obsessed as GE with the problem of corporate image—an image, it was at great pains to establish, of GE as a keystone institution of the American Way. It was a constant target of Progressive Era antitrust enthusiasts when in 1922 a new president named Gerard Swope took over and utterly reorganized the corporation's strategy. Swope now branded its flowing, stylized logo, formerly all but invisible to ordinary consumers, on every product he could—and hired experts in two novel professions, public relations and advertising, to "brand" it in customers' minds as well. An adman from GE's lamp division named Bruce Barton became an articulate propagandist for the new model. "In Barton's theology," a scholar has written, "advertising was a sacred calling primarily concerned with the revelation of the corporate soul." One of Barton's campaigns styled GE (founded by Thomas Edison) as the inventor not just of lightbulbs but of *light:* its employees, he said, were "engaged in the great profession of lighting the world," under a charter from "the beginning of time . . . recorded in the four words, 'Let there be light.'" His colleague, the public relations consultant Edward Bernays, christened the fiftieth anniversary of Edison's 1879 invention "Light's Golden Jubilee." The goal, Barton said, was instilling "electrical consciousness"—a corporate

desideratum all the more pressing with the coming of World War II, when GE anticipated the rich prospect of a postwar building boom with ads featuring, for example, a soldier sitting on a park bench with his gal sketching their future home for "when Victory is won": a house, naturally, crowded with the "new comforts, new conveniences, and new economies" of "electrical living."

From the start, GE identified television, which first surpassed radio in ad revenue in 1952, as electrical living's best salesman. GE was an innovative decentralized corporation, with each division and factory managed relatively independently of the others; the TV show was its first "all-company project"—and a pure product of its department of public relations. The show spoke to another Bruce Barton innovation: the notion of a "corporate culture," one that could be sold both internally to its scattered workforce of hundreds of thousands, and externally to millions of consumers. The TV show needed a host who embodied that culture. "We had been very, very definite as to the kind of person we wanted," an executive recalled, "a good, upright kind of person." And when MCA approached GE with Ronald Reagan—the guy whose future agent, in 1937, found him so "likable," "clean-cut," and "all-American"—it approved the casting almost immediately.

He loved the role. Previously a TV-basher in the mold of his erstwhile boss Jack Warner, he now adored the medium for delivering exactly what the newly entrepreneurial world of movie acting could not: job security. As he told the *Hollywood Reporter* in 1955, with a strikingly corporate self-consciousness, "my kind of association with a big business firm not only adds half or better of the economic value of my name, but provides a degree of security entirely foreign to the movie business, which is ruled so much by suicidal fluctuations, fads, and whims." And that self-consciousness—his identification of himself with the fortunes of his corporate sponsor, and the corporate system itself—soon made him even more useful to GE in another role.

Another facet of the self-image GE sought to project to the world was as a steward of America's very well-being. The way those Junior Achievement kids were depicted—niftily and uncomplainingly dividing themselves into an organic hierarchy, owners and managers and workers; frictionlessly coordinating their activities toward economically useful ends, each for the benefit of all; free from any and all resentment—reflected GE's self-image, too. The corporate behemoth saw its 166 plants in nearly thirty-eight states, manufacturing everything from tiny transistors to the nuclear reactors that got Ralph Cordiner on the cover of *Time* in 1959, as miraculously frictionless planes, free from conflict, let alone class conflict—that dreaded notion, beloved of labor unions, that workers and owners just might have interests in contradiction with one another and that their relationship was defined by a contest of wills. Selling that notion of industrial consensus became all the more crucial to GE brass following World War II, after the same 1946 strike wave that convulsed Hollywood shuttered nearly every GE plant in the country, just as the company hoped to flood all those GI starter homes with all the accoutrements of electrical living. The union representing its workers, one of the most radical in the country, won an eighteen-and-a-half-cent raise for production workers—and still they ravened for more.

Almost every GE plant had gone on strike—all except the seven manufacturing subsidiaries managed by a man named Lemuel Boulware, who soon was promoted to be the entire firm's vice president for labor relations. Though Boulware himself requested his title be changed to one that better suited his more visionary understanding of his undertaking: "vice president for public and community relations." An executive with a strong background in marketing, he conceived of his job as far transcending negotiating labor contracts—as, in fact, reshaping the nature of the capitalist firm itself. Quietly, he soon became the most influential American most people have never heard of. More than any other figure before him, he conceptualized a way to promote the sort of right-wing politics traditionally favored by corporate behemoths—low taxes and neutralized union power; unchallenged managerial control and freedom from government regulatory interference; a vision of American power and benevolence backstopped by a conception of the owners of capital as the exemplary citizens of the republic—as a problem in modern marketing. He conceived his most important audience as GE's 250,000 employees, their families, and the communities in which they lived. His goal was to teach them to identify their most intimate interests with the well-being of the company—and their company's with the well-being of the free world itself.

In other words, to turn millions of Americans into right-wing conservatives.

Lemuel Boulware was said by labor experts to understand the mind of the American working class better than any other executive in America. He won that knowledge by means of innovative techniques: surveys; interviews with ministers and voluntary organizations in the communities containing GE's plants; even what marketers would later

call "focus groups"—gathering GE toilers before members of his staff of three thousand "job marketers" to test which messages about company benevolence and union malevolence resonated and which ones failed.

The story was sold through slogans: "The Best Balanced Interests of All"; "G.E.—The Initials of a Friend"; "Steady Jobs Through Steady Friends"; "More Sales—More Jobs—More Pay—More Earnings—More Taxes—AND MORE GOOD DONE, TOO!" A constant stream of company-sponsored newspapers and magazines published articles like "How General Electric Keeps Trying to Make Jobs Better" and "What Is Communism? What Is Capitalism? What Is the Difference to You?" and "How Big Are General Electric Profits—Are They Too Big?" (no, that was impossible; if profits were too big, the free market would punish GE when other manufacturers undercut its prices) and "The How and Why of Curbing Inflationary Settlements." (If a contract set wages any higher than what GE's benevolent management, objectively following the dictates of the competitive market, offered at the beginning of contract negotiations, it would only harm workers in the long run when the company was forced by that selfsame market to increase the price of the GE products they bought in the stores and whose profits paid their wages.)

The work drilled down to the most basic conceptions about how society ought to be organized. Every supervisor received a copy of a short book by the right-wing ideologue James Flynn, *The Road Ahead,* which argued that the New Deal was a first step toward a totalitarian nightmare. Every employee received instruction on company time in free-market economics from a specially commissioned textbook by an economics columnist who had once been a radical, Lewis Henry Haney. (Ironically, he had written the socialist economics textbook Ronald Reagan had studied in college.) It advocated repealing the 1937 law that made union organizing a right. It also included the chapter "Seven Ways to Lose Freedom or Save It." (Freedom was always on the brink of extinction.) Managers were also encouraged to convene study groups in their homes. The recommended reading included a free-market primer by the *Wall Street Journal* columnist Henry Hazlitt, called *Economics in One Lesson: The Shortest and Surest Way to Understand Basic Economics* (1946); according to Hazlitt, "economics was haunted by more fallacies than any other study known to man," put forward by political demagogues who "recommend squandering on a national scale as a way to economic salvation." One company publication ran a cartoon version of Austrian economist Friedrich von Hayek's libertarian manifesto *The Road to Serfdom.*

And then, even before General Electric Theater debuted on CBS one Sunday night in September 1954, another front in the Boulwarite scheme was opened up: GE's in-house movie star, swooping down on the cities, villages, and burgs containing GE plants, and getting down to the business of his life's work—charming other human beings, making them feel good.

A day might begin at, say, the Skylark Hotel in Hendersonville, North Carolina, a town where GE made outdoor lighting. (The company's expansion into under-unionized Southern states honored a theory of GE's own coinage: valuing a community's "business climate," defined as "an absence of unwarranted strikes and slowdowns," "an adequate supply of people" with "a good work attitude"—and most of all low taxes and prevailing wages.) Then came a series of fifteen-minute talks with general managers and section managers; then tours of four separate parts of the plant—doing his best to meet the eyes of the blurry figures before him (the industrial dust kept him from wearing his contact lenses). Then lunch, meaning separate fifteen-minute back-to-back sessions with hourly and salaried employees; then another factory tour; then a jaunt to the local high school for a preview of the next *GE Theater* episode for employee families; then finally an evening reception at Hendersonville Country Club, where he might avail himself in respectable mixed company of yet one more of his charming gifts: "He was the most inventive man with a dirty joke I've ever known," a GE executive along for the ride marveled. "He could clean up filthy stories and make them fit for an old nun . . . funnier than the original and it was impossible to take offense."

The format, at each gathering, was question-and-answer—which served as cues for favorite colorful (but not too colorful) Hollywood stories. He might show off his shirt, custom sewn by Jimmy Cagney's tailor to make his head look bigger on camera. That might open up to a tale of how Cagney just missed out on the role of Knute Rockne in *Knute Rockne, All American* (Coach Rockne's widow preferred Pat O'Brien). He might call forward his road manager, a former FBI agent named George Dalen, for a knockabout demonstration about how fights were staged for the camera. He might dip a toe, gingerly, in politics, relating that heroic tale about actors thwarting the Communist conspiracy to take over Hollywood—"against tremendous odds while they faced bombing of their homes, overturning of their cars, and burning of the buses that carried them through the picket lines to the lots."

Then the next stop on some yawning plant floor. The women might flock beside him, pressing mash notes into his hand, begging for auto-

graphs; the men, watching, glowered ("I bet he's a fag. . . ."). "He would carry on a conversation with the girls just so long," remembered his handler; "then he would leave them and walk over to these fellows. . . . When he left them ten minutes later, they were all slapping him on the back, saying, 'That's the way, Ron!'"

Spouting statistics, he might start in on an obsession: the nation's misperception that movie actors "live in a state of legalized prostitution because of the numerous divorces." That mind of his, always hoovering up statistics, throwing them back in a blizzard: some called it his "photographic memory." Better to say it was a preternatural confidence: details hurled forth with sufficient confidence always sound true—but "facts," in sufficient profusion, whatever their reliability, can serve as fables as well. He said the twenty-six thousand citizens of the movie colony, making up but 1 percent of Los Angeles's population, made 12 percent of its charitable contributions; that 70 percent were married and 68 percent had children and that they led the nation in adoption of children, in church membership, in the absence of crime. And in the solidity of marriage: their divorce rate was 29.9 percent. "So we're asking that you catch up with our high moral standards!" A remarkable claim to make of the homeland of Fatty Arbuckle, Errol Flynn, Lionel Barrymore—and, well, of the recently divorced contract player who kept waking up at the Garden of Allah next to starlets whose names he didn't know.

It opened him up to hecklers: *"So why did you divorce Jane Wyman?" "How much are they paying you for this shit?"* He learned to put them down with dispatch: *"None of your business, buster!" "They haven't got enough to make me put up with you."*

He denied there was anything political about it. ("Actors are citizens and should exert those rights by speaking their minds, but the actor's first duty is to his profession. Hence, you can rest assured that I will never again run for mayor or anything but head man in my own household," he wrote in the November 1955 *Hollywood Reporter*.) But if he happened to change his mind, this was a splendid apprenticeship in retail politics. And soon an ideological apprenticeship as well. He began speaking to community groups. His other road manager, Earl Dunckel, a conservative who liked to debate his companion over politics, recollected how that began. A massive meeting of high school teachers scheduled for the Schenectady armory was on the verge of cancellation when "their speaker came down ill." That led to that speech, reported in national newspapers, in which Reagan castigated the "vicious attacks of the ultra-professional patriotic organizations that can eventually wreck our school system." Dunckel, who had no idea how to write a speech

about education and so hadn't wanted to accept the invitation, remembered Reagan coming up with it on his own—and winning a ten-minute standing ovation.

Reagan himself, though, claimed an entirely different genesis for his political speeches under GE's auspices. In his account the transition took place a year later, and his account stuffed his liberalism down the memory hole. He remembered being drafted to speak to a group of employees on the subject of charity—and giving "a speech about the pride of giving and the importance of doing things without waiting for the government to do it for you," and about how "when individuals or private groups were involved in helping the needy none of the contributions were spent on overhead or administrative costs" (a nice fairy tale). "Unlike government relief programs where $2 was often spent on overhead for every $1 that went to needy people." He wrote in a memoir, "As we were driving away from the plant, the man from G.E. said, 'I didn't know you could give speeches.'"

Either way, the company started sending him out as its rhetorical ambassador.

Facing audiences primed by unceasing company propaganda to despise liberal demagogues, he found favor with them by telling tales of corporate heroes doing thankless battle with ceaseless tides of intellectual error, including some in his own beloved movie industry—for instance, tales of the "tremendous harassment" of studios by the IRS via measures like the 20 percent amusement tax and the 90 percent top marginal income tax rate. He spoke against the Justice Department's ban on "so-called block booking that splits up some of the risk in movie making"—block booking being the monopolistic practice of studios of forcing theaters to buy every one of their pictures. In a speech in Youngstown, Ohio, he called that "censorship"—a windup to a peroration about how unless Americans recognized that such injuries against one industry's liberties was an injury to all, they "might be on your doorstep next, and by then it might be too late."

Once more: freedom was always on the verge of extinction; in 1948, the predators were the tax evaders; the prey was the common man. By 1960 the lion and the lamb had switched places: now it was the likes of Standard Oil and Hollywood who were the put-upon martyrs—moral role models, in fact.

One way he found his way to this new set of identifications was psychological: the speaker pulled himself toward his audiences as much as the other way around. "An interesting thing happened," he said of these conclaves of people he might once have judged to be off-putting Bab-

bitts: "No matter where I was, I'd find people from the audience waiting to talk to me after a speech and they'd all say, 'Hey, if you think things are bad in your business, let me tell you what is happening in my business. . . .' I'd listen and they'd cite examples of government interference and snafus and complain how bureaucrats, through overregulation, were telling them how to run their businesses." He adjusted course to better solicit their approbation. This was how he became a hero among the new company he kept.

Another contributing factor: the spokesman was afraid of flying on airplanes. ("I've decided," he wrote to the GE executive who accompanied him during his first two years, Dunckel, decades later, "that I am not going to say I get on planes, I'm just going to say—I wear them.") He was a voracious reader. So the cross-country Super Chief train became his study room. He pored over right-wing fare: William F. Buckley's new biweekly, *National Review* (Reagan was a charter subscriber); *Human Events*, the gut-punching conservative activist newsletter; his old favorite, *Reader's Digest*, more and more given over to horror stories of the H. R. Gross variety about government programs as well-intended sinkholes of waste, fraud, folly, and abuse. He also read books, the sort of books the GE managers read in living-room study groups alongside their wives and neighbors. He called it "a postgraduate course in political science."

One of the books that made an impression on him was Hazlitt's *Economics in One Lesson*. The one lesson, which opened that slim volume as an overture, was only two pages long—though the author said it could also be reduced to a sentence: "The art of economics consists in looking not merely at the immediate but at the longer effect of any policy; it consists of tracing the consequences of that policy not merely for one group but for all groups." The rest was but commentary. For example, in chapter four, Hazlitt wrote of how "taxation for public housing . . . destroys as many jobs in other lines as it creates in housing," in the form of "unbuilt private homes, in unmade washing machines and refrigerators." The Tennessee Valley Authority was Hazlitt's example par excellence of the calamities would-be do-gooders wrought, because of all the "private power plants, the private homes, the typewriters and television sets that were never allowed to come into existence because of the money that was taken from people all over the country to build the photogenic Norris Dam." Beware liberal demagogues bearing gifts. They would bring us an apocalypse that would become evident only when it was too late—but not if patriots sounded the tocsin while they still stood a chance.

And so Ronald Reagan began sounding that tocsin, with the energy of an erupting volcano.

One time, his next GE handler marveled, he did it Mr. Smith–style, before an audience of startled schoolchildren he happened upon after asking for a tour of the Rhode Island state capitol in Providence. His handler remembered the words indelibly:

"If we believe nothing is worth dying for, when did this begin?"

(He waved at the glorious Early Republic edifice before them.)

"Should Moses have told the children of Israel to live in slavery rather than dare the wilderness?

"You and I, my friend, have a rendezvous with destiny," he said soaringly. This was striking: it paraphrased the peroration Franklin Roosevelt had given at his inauguration in June 1936. He concluded, "If we flop, at least our kids could say of us that we justified our brief moment here, 'We did all that could be done.'"

GENERAL ELECTRIC THEATER'S EPISODES ENCODED AN IDEOLOGY IN themselves: its writers devised the most extraordinary conundrums—comic ones, dramatic ones, whichever—each and every time resolving them within the half hour, in perfect expression of that 1950s faith that nothing, anything, need ever remain in friction in the nation God had ordained to benevolently bestride the world.

Then, in mid-story, those commercials. For instance, amid a 1955 episode in which Reagan starred in a melodrama on the Irish civil war, "G.E. Progress Report" correspondent Don Herbert (who'd formerly starred in a show called *Watch Mr. Wizard*) explained to an agog little boy the great strides GE was making on a new technology, "transistors," which might someday produce TVs with flat screens and radios smaller than cigarette packs:

"Where's my Dick Tracy wrist radio?"

"Not so fast! Right now the armed forces have first call on miniaturization developments. It might take ten years before we have them in our homes. But General Electric scientists are always looking for new ways to make living easier and more comfortable."

"And more fun!"

"That's right, Billy. And all that adds up to progress. And at General Electric, progress is our most important product!"

Or the ones that took the viewer, literally, into Ronald and Nancy Reagan's home. This was another facet of the GE corporate culture: the company, in Barton's coinage, as "the headquarters of progress." At the 1939 World's Fair in New York, GE sponsored an "all-electric home"

with a "Magic Kitchen that moves, talks, and tells a timely story." Now the Magic Kitchen was in Pacific Palisades, and it starred a handsome movie couple and their cute little kids.

What a historian has called TV's first reality series began in the second season, when his "total electric house," housing "television's first all-electric family," was still under construction. Reagan strolled around the site as his electrical contractor demonstrated how you, the viewer, might wire your property for "full house power." Nancy, in her first screen role since *Donovan's Brain*, broke comically into her husband's technical meanderings to deliver the bottom line for the ladies: "Well I'm glad we have it. Because we're going to have some wonderful electric equipment and we want to have all the entertainment and pleasure and comfort out of that equipment that we can!"

In 1957, the Western *Too Good with a Gun* cross-fades to Don Herbert:

"Tonight we're going visiting at the Ronald Reagans' again, in their new home, to see how their many wonderful electrical servants are helping them, just as they'll help you *live better electrically*!"

Cue Nancy and four-year-old Patti, and the "perfect meal" courtesy of GE's "electrical servants": a toaster oven for the English muffins covered in melted cheese, an automatically timed electric skillet that "makes a tricky dish like soufflé 'easy and safe to make'"—"My electrical appliances do everything!"

(In actuality Nancy didn't cook. Or, as a fan magazine item on their courtship had put it, "Nancy knits Reagan argyle socks, though she doesn't cook for him. Her talent in the kitchen doesn't equal her talent before the cameras, concerning which her boss, Dore Schary says, 'she's a fine actress.'")

Patti, adorably: "What's elesses apolotz?"

"They're all the things around the house that make Mommy's work easier.' . . . One at a time or all together, they make quite a difference in the way we live. That's why every housewife wants them, the latest models with the newest improvements."

Ronnie: "Because she knows that you really begin to live when you live better—"

Patti: "—Eletriffly!"

A market research company studying "impact scores" called *GE Theater* "the leading institutional campaign on television for selling ideas to the public." *TV Guide* called its leading salesman "the ambassador of all things mechanical." A retracting patio canopy roof. A painting of a sailboat that slid to one side to reveal a "projection machine for

home movies." Something called a "garbage disposal." A wall cabinet hiding a "high fidelity." (Nancy: "It's almost as if the orchestra were playing right here in the living room"; Ronnie: "There's no trick to it; it's just a matter of starting in easy stages, one item at a time.") "Everything electric but the chair," went Reagan's own joke. Or the one about the guy who watched too much *GE Theater*. "I didn't really need a nuclear submarine," he said. "But I've got one now."

WITHIN A YEAR OF HIS GE DEBUT HE SHARED MASTER-OF-CEREMONY DUties with Art Linkletter for the most-watched live television broadcast in history, the grand opening of Disneyland (Reagan introduced Walt Disney). In 1957, when the legendary host of *This Is Your Life*, Ralph Edwards, missed a show for the first time in seventeen years, it was Reagan who filled in for him. He made a triumphant return to deliver the commencement address to Eureka College's Class of 1958. ("This is a land of destiny," he said, "and our forefathers found their way here by some divine system of selective service—gathered here to fulfill a mission to advance man a further step in his climb from the swamps.") That was the year a survey found that Reagan had one of the most recognized names in the country. His corporate Medici had delivered him. In turn, the thrum of corporate life itself came to delight him.

"Reagan Says Business Beats Hollywood at Its Own Game," ran one profile headline. "The Actor in the Gray Flannel Suit," ran another. "Ronald Reagan is one of the few actors in Hollywood who always carries two brief cases," that profile reported. "One of them is jammed with scripts, the other thick with business correspondence and memos." Corporate titans had become his new heroes, his new role models—his new cowboys. They also became his social intimates. That contributed to the ideological transformation, too.

Nancy Reagan had applied herself to an aspiration: to join the ranks of Los Angeles society—the Beverly Hills types with a traditional distaste for sullying their ranks by seeking picture folks out. So Nancy sought them out: sending Patti in 1956 to prekindergarten at the exclusive John Thomas Dye School in Bel Air; telling the proprietress of her favorite Beverly Hills boutique, Amelia Gray, "I'd like to meet some girls out of the picture industry"; charming the ladies she met in said boutiques, such as Betty Adams, scion of one of Los Angeles's first families, and seeking to insinuate her family into their circles—and, soon, famously, succeeding.

Adams hosted a dinner party to introduce "Ronnie and Nancy" to the likes of the Wilsons and the Bloomingdales and the Jorgensens—

Betty Wilson and Bill Wilson, whose father in 1913 founded Pennzoil; Betsy Bloomingdale and Alfred Bloomingdale, president of Diners Club, heir to the department store fortune; Marion Jorgensen and Earle Jorgensen, steel and aluminum magnate. Soon she was prowling the boutiques with the former model and legendary clotheshorse Harriet Deutsch, whose husband, Armand, was grandson of the founder of Sears and reputedly its biggest stockholder. The Reagans began hosting regular barbecues for a tight-knit cadre—"The Group"—of eighteen plutocrats and their society wives, and star couples including the Bill Holdens, the George Burnses, the Jack Bennys. (Benny, for some reason, tabbed Reagan with the nickname "the Governor.")

Maybe it had something to do with his especially close bond with Walter Annenberg, whom Reagan had first met in 1937 when the young publishing heir was running *Screen Guide* and they competed for the same woman. Now with his wife, Lee (Annenberg, like Ronnie, called his wife "Mother"), he owned one of the greatest private art collections in the world, was plumping for Richard Nixon for president as one of the Republican Party's most generous benefactors, and published *TV Guide*—which featured its publisher's dear friends on the cover in November 1958, relaxing in front of a barn with an adorable collie in tow, Ronnie boasting inside about the small profit he made each year in his horse breeding business, reflecting on the secret of *General Electric Theater*'s consistent spot high up the ratings—"keeping the show on an intimate basis where the star is playing to one viewer. There has to be a feeling between the two"—and chuckling about the days when he used to be a liberal: "When you're younger, you have fiery ideas."

He was forty-seven—a conservative now. Given the way he thought about the world, Boulwarism was the perfect conduit: through its sluices, he absorbed a right-wing politics that imagined no necessity for class conflict at all. A perfect conservatism for Ronald Reagan, who hated acknowledging friction—like when he said there need be no conflict in the Hollywood strike, that SAG could simply declare "neutrality" and be done with it; and when he called the blanket waiver he granted MCA a deal that helped everyone in Hollywood. Conflict was always, ever, just something introduced from the outside by alien forces (liberals, Communists), who revealed themselves, in that very act of disturbance, as aliens, enemies to all that was good and true, natural and right. That was how Reagan saw the world. This was how he radiated the aura that made others feel so good.

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THE TIMING OF HIS IDEOLOGICAL MATURATION WAS PROPITIOUS. BY 1958, the contradictions between the social vision of America's ascendant labor movement—that the individual was best dignified by removing him from the vagaries of market competition—and the vision of corporate barons like GE's—that market competition was precisely what produced individual dignity—seemed to be approaching a pitch near to civil war. Conservatives put antiunion "right to work" initiatives on the ballot in seven states; the AFL-CIO's Committee on Political Education promised its most aggressive electoral drive in history to defeat them. Lemuel Boulware, for his part, convened a historic meeting on a resort island off Florida with like-minded executives from a number of companies to strategize about how they might launch a coordinated national crusade to persuade "vast numbers of other businessmen to rise publicly to defend us when we are under attack," to make producing a healthy "business climate" not just a question for siting General Electric factories, but part of a twilight struggle against the ruinous liberal demagogues in communities everywhere.

For Boulware, moving businessmen into national politics fulfilled an ambition of long standing. "We businessmen are bold and imaginative before commercial competition," as he put it in a widely republished 1949 speech. "We are cowardly and silent in public when confronted with union and other economic and political doctrines contrary to our belief." He was determined they be cowardly no more. "No one," he complained, "seems to be willing to go through the agony of trying to put what we think is right and what we instinctively know is right into language that is intelligible and convincing to the great mass of citizens who at the moment are being lied to by their government and by their unions." Words like these made an enormous impression on his Hollywood ambassador, who was saying almost identical things decades later in speeches as governor to organizations like the National Association of Manufacturers: "It is time for business to start presenting the facts, because the facts are on your side. But, for heaven's sake, don't just repeat them to each other by way of your trade journals. Tell the people, and especially your customers and your employers—and usually they are one and the same—and tell our sons and daughters."

That was in 1972. But he said it first as General Electric's coast-to-coast ambassador from Hollywood. His responsibilities for the company thus grew; the company's relationship with the star became more intimate. More and more, broadcast episodes bore his personal stamp. For the Easter Sunday episode in 1958, for instance, he found a role he

told the press was one of the three best he ever had. As the *Miami News* announced it, "Ronald Reagan, personification of the All-American male, gets a reprieve from 'nice guy' roles in the April 6 'General Electric Theater.' He'll play a Skid Row drunk." In the episode, called "No Hiding Place" he played a real-life figure who picks himself out of the gutter and develops a 90 percent success rate saving others from alcoholism. (The script adamantly refused the teachings of his own mother concerning his father, and also the conclusion of Alcoholics Anonymous, that alcohol addiction was a disease. It also eschewed AA's vision of recovery as a complex, fundamentally communal process, the hero preaching instead that addiction was a "a vice . . . acquired as any other vice is acquired," that "you will it on yourself," and that recovery was a simple matter of bootstrapping willpower—enabled, though, by the intervention of the character played by Ronald Reagan, achieving onscreen what he could not achieve as a child: a heroic rescue. It was perhaps the deepest reflection Reagan ever offered the public on his father's affliction.) And, more and more, he was drafted as the company's *ideological* ambassador in the media.

"I have to say," he said in 1958 on the country's most respected syndicated radio interview program (whose host pronounced his name correctly), "from the standpoint of labor, that General Electric has issued quite a challenge. Organized labor had better look around and review their own attitudes, in the face of this very enlightened attitude toward the people who work for them." He plied this ideology now in speaking assignments before civic clubs and for business organizations like the California Fertilizer Association and the National Electrical Contractors Association:

"We can lose our freedom at once by succumbing to Russia or we can lose it gradually by installments—the end result is slavery."

"There can be no moral justification of the progressive tax—an idea hatched in the Communist revolution."

"Get any proposed program accepted, then with the participation of government in the field established, work for expansion, always aiming at the ultimate goal—a government that will someday be Big Brother to us all."

In another speech, this one to GE workers, he spoke of how there were more federal employees "than there are farmers in the U.S."; that taxes ate up 27 percent of a gallon of gas and 34 percent of your phone bill—and that, yet, "we have been told by economists down through the years that if the total tax burden ever reaches 25 percent, we are in danger of undermining our private enterprise system." The litany sounded a hell of a lot better when GE's salaried, pompadoured charmer said it than when it came from some stern-sounding boss.

"UNDERMINING OUR PRIVATE ENTERPRISE SYSTEM." HERE WAS AN IRONY: the high tide of Boulwarism coincided, in the early 1950s and early '60s, with a series of federal indictments of General Electric executives for a conspiracy to fix prices. They had schemed with other electrical manufacturing firms to remove from the exigencies of the marketplace the prices of everything from two-dollar insulators to multimillion-dollar hydroelectric turbines. As a historian of GE explained, the men who ran GE "took a dim view of competition."

In 1960, GE's first strike since 1946 loomed. That same year Reagan earned a promotion. After years of enjoying an informal role in script selection and cast recruitment, he was officially named a producer. Simultaneously, his profile as a political troubador increased. "Boyish of face and gleaming of tooth, Ronald Reagan earned a reputation, among cinemagoers as a pleasant young man in white ducks, whose deepest thought was reserved for the next dance," *Time* magazine explained four months into John F. Kennedy's term, its first mention of Reagan outside the context of acting. "Once an outspoken Democrat, Reagan is now a staunch Republican [and] has developed into a remarkably active spokesman for conservatism." More and more, he devoted his *spare* time to crisscrossing the nation preaching genial hellfire about the nine years America had left before it was all slave or all free, about federal aid to education as a "tool of tyranny," and about welfare recipients as "a faceless mass waiting for a handout." He also volunteered his services to the American Medical Association's Boulware-style lobbying campaign against President Kennedy's plan for government health insurance for the elderly. For what the AMA's strategists labeled "Operation Coffee Cup," Reagan recorded a speech on an LP to be played at housewives' gatherings. In it, he proclaimed that "Medicare" was but an opening wedge for a government takeover of "every area of freedom as we have known in this country." First the federal government would assign where doctors would be allowed to live. Then—who knows? "We are going to spend our sunset years telling our children and our children's children what it was like in America when men were free."

But the company itself grew more cautious about taking on the government as its legal troubles deepened. And it was GE's star propagandist who ended up in the crosshairs. Sometimes Reagan pointed to the Tennessee Valley Authority as the most glaring example available to those seeking to rescue a nation giving up its freedom on the installment

plan, just as he'd learned from one of Lem Boulware's favorite books, *Economics in One Lesson*. But the TVA bought its turbines for its massive dams from GE. In his first memoir Reagan describes an awkward conversation with GE's CEO Ralph Cordiner, filled with long pauses, that concluded with Reagan asking, "Mr. Cordiner, what would you say if I said I could make my speech just as effectively without mentioning TVA?" He replied, "Well, it would make my job easier." Reagan dropped TVA from the speech.

At first the company had appeared to be either indifferent to or approving of his extracurricular activities. And with his newfound power he began using *GE Theater* to aggressively evangelize the notion that the Red conspiracy was burrowing within America's institutions as assiduously as it ever had been when he first took up arms against the Communist plot to take over Hollywood. The eighth season opened in September 1961 with Reagan starring as a Russian officer in Soviet-occupied Hungary ordered to break the spirit of a freedom-loving village. His conscience wracked, steely, trembling, Bogart-like, the officer announces his conversion in a melodramatic closing peroration: "In all my life I never knew freedom. Until I saw you lose yours. But you'll win it again. And maybe next time—you'll win it for all of us."

In March 1962 Reagan produced a two-part adaptation of a memoir, *I Was a Spy: The Story of a Brave Housewife*, which told the story a suburban mother, Marion Miller, who in 1950 stumbled into an apparently innocuous meeting of a "Committee for the Protection of the Foreign Born" and discovered it was but a front for what Joseph McCarthy had called that year a "conspiracy on a scale so immense as to dwarf any previous such venture in the history of man." The claim was absurd at the moment McCarthy made it: the American Communist Party that Miller went on to infiltrate on behalf of the FBI had long ago been all but abandoned by the USSR, which had entirely rolled up its espionage networks in America in the wake of the spy scandals of the late 1940s. American Communists were so diminished that soon after, by one estimate, such FBI infiltrators made up 17 percent of the total membership. It was even more absurd in its 1962 incarnation on *GE Theater*. The piece was set in the present, when there were practically no Communists left in America, but that didn't matter; hadn't Hoover said in 1947 that the number of Communists was not relevant, given "the enthusiasm and ironclad discipline under which they operate," their ideology "a condition akin to a disease that spreads like an epidemic"?

To those not inside the far right, "My Dark Days" must have resembled a *Twilight Zone* hijack of a situation comedy starring Donna Reed.

A party leader pays the Millers' home a visit just as their little girl comes out in her nightgown: "Mommy? You said you'd come out and listen to my prayers." "Prayers?" the commissar storms, then interrogates the little girl to get her to rat out her parents' ideological deviation.

Next, a comrade is forced to choose between his party membership and his non-Communist girlfriend:

"You can't live without love," she implores him.

"I can't quit the party. It would be like cutting out a piece of myself. I'd walk the earth like a ghost for the rest of my life."

He decides, once and for all, in favor of the revolution, and leaves his girlfriend's apartment.

"Jane!! No!!"

She leaps from a window to her death.

"I didn't leave the Democratic Party," Ronald Reagan used to like to say. "The Democratic Party left me." It was another Reagan story that dissolved the more closely it was examined. Once again, the platform JFK ran on in 1960 was well to the right of the one Reagan eagerly boomed out on the radio in 1948. (Kennedy just wanted government health insurance for the aged; Truman wanted it to be universal.) Another major difference, however, between Democrats then and Democrats beginning with Joe McCarthy's fall in the middle of the 1950s, when Reagan was joining up with GE, was that they had largely abandoned the good-versus-evil narrative of an invisible Bolshevik bacillus insinuating itself into a great but complacent nation's bloodstream. Respectable Democrats by Kennedy's day (those, at least, outside the reactionary Deep South) considered that an embarrassing relic of a too-paranoid time.

Ronald Reagan did not. And it is hard to see how Reagan could feel at home in a party that had abandoned a core tenet in his moral vision of the world and his own heroic place in it. Instead, his was now the sort of conservatism associated with the John Birch Society, whose McCarthy-like claim that Dwight D. Eisenhower had been a "conscious agent of the Communist conspiracy" had made that organization a national scandal, denounced by both Democrats and Republicans like Richard Nixon. But Reagan said he could find no "moral justification for repudiating" the Birchers. Indeed, he had adopted many of their nostrums as favorite speech lines. One was "The inescapable truth is that we are at war, and we are losing that war simply because we don't or won't realize we are in it. We have ten years. Not ten years to make up our mind, but ten years to win or lose—by 1970 the world will be all slave or all free." Another was a bogus quote attributed to Nikita Khrushchev:

"You Americans are so gullible. No, you won't accept communism outright. But we'll keep feeding you small doses of socialism until you finally wake up and find you already have communism. We won't have to fight you; we'll so weaken your economy until you fall like overripe fruit into our hands." Reagan gave one speech in 1961 insisting Communists were still "infiltrating all phases of the government." Senator Frank Church of Idaho earnestly wrote to J. Edgar Hoover to ask if he had any information supporting Reagan's charges. Reagan gave another speech to a convention of supermarket executives arguing that the Communist Party, "crawling out from under the rocks," had "ordered once again the infiltration" of the movie industry. This time, it was Hoover himself making the inquiries—once more sending agents to Ronald Reagan's home. He told the G-men he had been misquoted, but that there was still cause for concern—"one can smell a situation once it starts to develop."

And in the spring of 1962, the place he smelled it was in Hollywood's reaction to "My Dark Days."

An FBI document recorded that Reagan was the only producer to show interest in Marion Miller's story; its absurd excesses were surely the reason (the episode's director was so embarrassed by the prayer scene he fought unsuccessfully to have it cut), but Reagan blamed Reds. "On our producing staff the liberal view that communism is only something the 'Right-wingers' dreamed up prevails and they literally resorted to sabotage to pull the punch out of the show," he wrote to Lorraine Wagner. Even worse, someone sabotaged the broadcast. "In one place," he wrote to her, "there was sound but no picture."

Reagan was now a first citizen in the sort of circles that lionized Marion Miller and her husband (who had actually himself, the show did not reveal, been an undercover federal agent since 1939). They showered her with so many testimonials, awards, and patriotic medals that an ad for the next edition of her book called her "the most decorated housewife in the nation." She was one of those "professional patriots" he had tongue-lashed so passionately in 1954. And now, so was he. They shared stages, especially in the McCarthyite petri dish of Orange County, California—for instance, before 17,500 on "youth night" of the Southern California School of Anti-Communism, sponsored by the Australian physician Dr. Fred Schwartz, who preached how the Russians had mastered the techniques of animal husbandry to addle the will of their subject populations. Another man who spoke at the rally was a lawyer—Jane Wyman's divorce lawyer, as it happened—named Loyd Wright, who raised the roof by demanding a "preventive war": issue an ultimatum to the Soviet Union to leave Eastern Europe by a certain date, he proposed; and if it didn't, unleash the nuclear arsenal. "If we have to blow up Moscow, that's too bad."

It was around then that the star's next humiliation unfolded.

BY THE WEEK OF THE BROADCAST OF THE FIRST OF TWO EPISODES OF "MY Dark Days," Reagan learned *General Electric Theater* was in danger of not being renewed for its ninth season. In an interview with the *Boston Globe*'s TV columnist, he blithely chalked it up to vagaries in the executive suites: "CBS is doing all sorts of shuffling of schedules and feels we should move to another day." Instead, it ended up canceled altogether. What was really being discussed in those executive suites? No one ever came to know. There was the story, endlessly recycled, that made of Ronald Reagan a heroic martyr to principle: that he kept on hammering the Tennessee Valley Authority, until his bosses had no choice but to fire him. There is no evidence this was ever the case—not even from Ronald Reagan, who related in *Where's the Rest of Me?* how he obediently began omitting mention of TVA in his speeches the first time that his bosses asked.

A better explanation is Medicare. In June 1961, when Democrats in Congress decided to postpone action on Kennedy's bill because of the volume of angry constituent mail against it, the muckraking columnist Drew Pearson sourced the flood tide directly to Operation Coffee Cup, and claimed that "thanks to a deal with the AMA and the acquiescence of General Electric, Ronald Reagan may be able to out-influence the President of the United States." Reagan wrote an angry letter to Pearson: "I told your representative clearly and categorically that General Electric was not consulted in the matter, did not 'acquiesce' and in short had nothing at all to do with it." It was a very sensitive moment in the history of General Electric's relations with Washington: that summer, the company agreed to pay $7,448,000 in damages to the federal government to settle price-fixing suits.

That same summer, 1962, Loyd Wright ran in a three-way Republican senatorial nomination contest, becoming known as the "John Birch Society" candidate; Reagan served as his campaign chair. Also that summer, according to Reagan, he got a call asking him to limit his talks to commercial pitches for GE products—no politics. Shortly thereafter, he got twenty-four hours' notice that *General Electric Theater* was canceled. An anthology show hosted by Jack Webb, *G.E. True*, began running in its old Sunday night slot that fall, lasting only for one season. But ratings were never Ronald Reagan's problem. Ideology was—or at

least the opening episode of *G.E. True* suggested it was: as if in absolution, the story General Electric now presented to the nation was not one of anti-Communist freedom fighters in Hungary nor heroic FBI spies infilitrating the Communist conpsiracy, but a lionization of the left-wing icon Clarence Darrow.

Later, to his daughter Maureen, Reagan told a heroic story about what had happened: a friend had informed him of rumors that the federal government had threatened to cancel its contracts with GE unless he was fired; he checked out the rumor with his boss, who told him that it was true but that the company would not be blackmailed. "'Wait a minute,' dad said back without stopping to think about it," Maureen Reagan wrote in her memoir. "'There are an awful lot of people whose paychecks depend on those contracts. I appreciate your standing up for me, I really do, but I can't abide that.'" He said he offered to quit. However, at the time, he told other stories. He announced that the AFL-CIO "had tagged me as a strident voice of right wing extremism, and under the accepted liberal practice of the end justifying the means, proceeded to issue bulletins long on name-calling and short on truth." He hinted at Communist involvement. He blamed Bobby Kennedy. "Government contracts," he told his teenage son Michael at the dinner table. "This is exactly what I've been out there speaking about. We're on our way to a controlled society. The government is trying to control everything. And Robert Kennedy is behind the attack on me. . . . Because I'm speaking out against the Kennedy Administration and the road they're trying to lead us down."

His wife chimed in: "*Of course* Bobby Kennedy's behind it. It's obvious."

HOWEVER IT HAPPENED, HE NOW HAD LOST A $125,000 SALARY, AND bookings scheduled years into the future. Another professional humiliation. He picked up the occasional commercial, odd jobs like hosting the Rose Bowl Parade, episodes on TV series like *Wagon Train*. Then once more politics saved him.

That fall, he chaired Democrats for Nixon on behalf of Nixon's run for California governor. His anger at his martyrdom fueled him, and vaulted him into conservative movement superstardom—until he was as busy as before. In Long Island, in 1963, Young Americans for Freedom honored him in a rally that drew thirteen thousand people. That summer he began working on his first book. In 1964 he took on working toward Barry Goldwater's presidential nomination practically as a full-time job. The reviews, it turned out, were more spectacular than any he had

received in his life: "I think it would have been better if Ronald Reagan had just talked, and Goldwater had just sat there and nodded," one conservative said at the Republican convention that summer in San Francisco. That fall, he picked up host duties for another anthology show, replacing a wizened coot known to the world only as the "Old Ranger." *Death Valley Days* hacked out cheap half-hour Westerns. Syndicated, often running late at night, it was sponsored not by one of America's most majestic corporate citizens but by a brand of soap, Borax.

That meant the image lingering in citizens' minds when he began his political career was of Reagan in Western garb reciting silly sloganeering nonsense about "20-Mule Team Borax"—that, and the image of a sadistic cad smacking around a girl. For he finally landed a meaty roll, his first in decades, in the nifty existentialist crime caper *The Killers*, the very first movie in history produced for broadcast on TV. But it turned out to be far too violent to *show* on TV. It played in theaters instead, where, for the first and last time in his acting career, he played not a researcher but a bad guy—one whom another bad guy laid flat with a punch. He regretted taking that role for the rest of his life.

And then, on October 27, 1964, with dazzling quickness, the rest of his life began. Barry Goldwater's rich California backers prevailed upon the Goldwater campaign to put on TV the speech Reagan had been giving for years, repurposed for the Republican nominee, to raise money for the flagging presidential campaign. "You and I," he said, "have a rendezvous with destiny. We will preserve for our children, this the last best hope on earth, or we will sentence them to take the first step into a thousand years of darkness." David Broder called it "the most successful national political debut since William Jennings Bryan electrified the 1896 Democratic Convention with the 'Cross of Gold' speech."

He was now a conservative *superstar*. Two years later, he was governor of the nation's largest and richest state. And by 1975, after eight years in office, he was ready to meet his next rendezvous with destiny—ministering to a wounded nation's soul.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Governing

WHEN REAGAN GAVE HIS SPEECH FOR GOLDWATER THE DONATIONS IT brought in erased the deficit of the Goldwater campaign. People started asking their conservative friends, Why wasn't this guy the candidate? And almost before the broadcast was over, Reagan's rich businessmen friends—his "kitchen cabinet"—began putting together an organization to slate him for the 1966 governor's race. He spent six months in 1965 giving speeches around the state, testing the waters; finding them warm, he entered in January with an extraordinary, unprecedented TV show, complete with theme music that sounded like *Leave It to Beaver* and a title graphic (RONALD REAGAN AND A NEED FOR ACTION! over a map of the state). Just as he once did for General Electric, he warmly invited viewers into his home—smiling, be-suited, with one of his trademark pocket silks, again not looking all that different from his first screen appearance leaning jauntily against the camera in a tweed three-piece suit, holding a fedora, in that 1937 trailer for *Love Is on the Air*.

He began, amiably, telling stories from his six-month tour: "I've been on a California street 8,000 feet above sea level, and one below sea level. I've thrown a snowball and watched water-skiers, all in the same day. And I haven't begun to cover the state. Actually I think you could spend a lifetime just seeing and getting to know California. . . ." He picked up a ketchup bottle from a table beside him, like in a TV commercial, with a professional's skill so as to obscure the brand logo, the camera pulling back to show a roaring fire behind him and a leather easy chair to his right: "A ketchup bottle is a pretty commonplace item. But when the secretary of labor and our own state government finished their experiments in reform among farm workers and canceled out the Bracero program, there were twenty-eight million fewer of these manufactured in one plant in Oakland. . . ."

How unlikely was it when this movie-star-cum-pitchman won the nomination that spring against a well-liked pillar of the Republican establishment? So unlikely that a *Washington Star* columnist reported

an "air of furtive jubilation at Lassie for Governor headquarters," and *Esquire* said, "The Republican Party isn't bankrupt, or isn't that bankrupt that it has to turn to Liberace for leadership." How unlikely was it that he could survive a general election campaign? Richard Nixon had some thoughts about that. He sent a young aide to take some notes to Reagan for his political coming-out before the National Press Club in Washington. Reagan ignored the advice, and virtually charmed his audience out of their doubts—and after Reagan won the general election, on a platform of singeing student protesters and foregrounding the menace to law and order represented by liberal social programs, Nixon ended up borrowing the themes for his own 1968 campaign. Nixon's presumed student was actually the master.

When Reagan became governor in 1967, the shock for his skeptics was simply this: that the antigovernment supposed incompetent actually governed. "Amazingly enough," *Newsweek* reported upon completion of his first hundred days, the "host of *Death Valley Days* has managed to close one of the widest credibility gaps any politician ever faced." And after he left office in 1975, the postmortems from the guardians of elite discourse were much the same. Elizabeth Drew wrote in the *New Yorker* that "he was a reasonably competent governor of California and that his administration was more progressive than his political rhetoric suggested"; Richard Reeves observed that he had proved himself "passive, moderate, and moderately effective" at providing "big government as usual."

They were not wrong. As governor, Reagan consistently proposed just the sort of conservative policies he had campaigned on—most controversially, immediately upon his ascension, a 10 percent across-the-board cut in the budgets of every state department. And when passage of radical notions like this proved impractical (indiscriminate 10 percent cuts turned out to be a novice's fantasy, given that much of the state budget was hemmed in by federal and state statutes he had no power to change), he changed course, moved on, learned, and adjusted, gladly dropping right-wing orthodoxy when more pragmatic solutions presented themselves. He felt out the status of institutional and popular power for and against his preferred nostrums, playing things by ear. Democrats controlled both houses of the legislature, and in negotiations he took his adversaries seriously, respectfully, and tried to get the best deal he could. He wanted to succeed, to chalk up accomplishments. Indeed, he frustrated conservative purists to such a degree that in 1971 some of them even launched a recall movement, calling him a "discredit to the American spirit, to the West, and to our California heritage."

But Elizabeth Drew and Richard Reeves were not entirely right. Their assessments did not nearly convey the whole story. He was, yes, pragmatic like any successful politician. But the way he did it was different. When he made compromises, he always insisted that they were only tactical and technical—and always, he would say afterward, the fault of someone else: Democrats, generally; liberals, specifically. His rhetorical habit of parsing the world into black-and-white persisted when he became a governing executive. It some ways, it even deepened.

For instance, he had affected horror at a demand from the state legislature in 1971 to make tax collection more efficient by withholding payments automatically from paychecks: "Taxes should hurt," he said, insisting, "My feet are in concrete." He proved able to loosen his feet from that concrete, giving in—then, when the 1972 tax bill he signed brought an unexpected revenue windfall, the $851 million state budgetary surplus it produced became his marquee boast, even though it came largely from reforms in the collection of revenue that he had so adamantly opposed. And the increased money flowing into state coffers also became Exhibit A in proving government was a devouring Gila monster. Indeed, it was the foundational argument for his Proposition 1 tax limitation initiative.

These claims were contradictory. Reagan was opportunistic that way—and rhetorically successful in his opportunism. He proved gifted at jumbling budgetary statistics. "Five years ago our state budget was second in size to the federal government," he said in 1971. (Why shouldn't it be? California was the largest state.) "Today, we are fourth—behind the federal government, New York State, and New York City. Five years ago, there were 102,456 full-time Civil Service employees on the state payroll. When we ended the fiscal year in June there were 101,399, or 1,066 fewer than when we started." It all made his accomplishments sound very . . . Reaganite. What it obscured, though, was that he inherited a $4.6 billion state budget in 1967, and left behind one of $10.2 billion in 1975. And that the average individual Californian's tax burden when he took office was $426, but when he left it was almost double that, $728. But here was the gift: he could claim that this only proved his point—that Sacramento and Washington, whose top-down dictates to states could always be offered as excuses, were intractable puzzle palaces, defying the people's will at ever turn.

When worse came to worst—as when he signed the nation's most liberal abortion law—he might claim an offending passage had been slipped in at the last minute. Excuses were always readily on offer—excuses that ended up making his rhetorical position stronger instead

of weaker. Because liberals were furtive and diabolical in ways unsullied innocents could not comprehend.

He framed economy measures, where he achieved them, not just as cost savings, but as shimmering moral advances—for instance his success paring the budget of the state's mental health system. It was, his budget aides suggested, one area where a 10 percent reduction could easily be realized—given that the number of mental patients was already plummeting due to new medical advances like tranquilizing drugs. First in 1967, and then again in 1972, thousands of positions were eliminated from the state's Department of Mental Hygiene. He called that in a 1972 speech a "new approach to the treatment of the mentally ill that has reduced the number of patients sentenced to a hopeless life in our asylums from 16,500 to 7,000"; and who could object to that? Harried, baffled psychiatrists, it turned out, one of whom later recollected how "Reagan with one bold, brilliant stroke abolished mental illness in California," and hospital staffs were required to turn away the most broken people imaginable: "Back to violent alcoholic families. Back to angry spouses . . . to rag-filled grocery carts . . . to sleeping in molder-ing cars. Back to the community of cocaine-crazed friends and pitiless dealers awaiting them outside the hospital gates." The apparent earlier, salutary decline in mental patients requiring hospitalization, it turned out, had been a mirage—because the ones who were left were the ones unresponsive to the new procedures, and had always required by far the most care. The hospitals themselves had always been understaffed in the first place. The reductions were a plain and simple nightmare. And yet Reagan proved able to blithely deny a problem existed. When a visiting expert from Sweden called a ward in Sonoma County the worst he had seen in several countries, the governor accused the staff there of having "rigged" the poor conditions to sabotage his planned cutbacks. "We lead the nation in the quality of our mental patient care," he simply said, "and we will keep that lead."

To claim a mere mixed success was never enough. Take, for example, the time he set his mind for his second term to reform California's welfare system, which he called "a cancer that is destroying those it should succor and threatening society itself." And it was true the welfare system in California was broken, from whatever ideological position one viewed it. Leftists could point out that benefits had not been raised since 1967—$172 for a family of three when the minimum subsistence income in San Francisco was $271. Conservatives could point out that the number of recipients had exploded from 357,00 in 1963 to 1,566,000 in 1970—an unquestionably unsustainable rate of increase.

But when the process of reforming the system began, the debate soon broke down in a tangle of mutual public recrimination between Reagan and liberals who distrusted his claimed desire to "adequately provide for the truly needy." The impasse was magnanimously broken by his rival, assembly speaker Bob Moretti, who offered to begin negotiations anew even though he held a controlling majority in the legislature. The two sides sat down for two weeks of intense talks, which began each day at 9 A.M. and lasted some nights until after dark. The resulting bill Reagan signed was a genuine compromise product—and, according to an independent analysis published six years later, a genuine success.

The resulting statistics thereafter became a staple of his campaign rhetoric: "When I came into office, California was the welfare capital of the nation. Sixteen percent of all those receiving welfare in the country were in California. The caseload was increasing 40,000 a month. We turned that increase into an 8,000 a month decrease. We returned to the taxpayers $2 billion and we increased grants to the truly needy."

But that this was the product of joint proposals of both Republicans and Democrats—and that the slowed increase in welfare cases was also the fortuitous result of demographic accident (most eligible recipients were already on the rolls by 1971)—was missing from such storytelling. By his account, Democrats had figured merely as wreckers and irritants, moved off the dime only by the fury of an outraged California electorate.

He piled on fantastical claims. One part of the new welfare law, included at his firm insistence, was a pilot program requiring recipients in some counties to work. It failed, most people on welfare lacking the job skills to make them useful to employers, despite the governor's claim that there existed a massive pool of employable lollygaggers. In 1974, the work program's peak year, it was able to enroll only 4,760 out of 182,735 welfare recipients, despite massive investment in staff time and effort from the governor's office. All told, only 0.2 percent of welfare recipients ever received jobs through the program; most were for tasks like raking leaves. And though the program was supposed to decrease the number of people applying for relief, applications for welfare turned out to be greater in counties with the program than those without. In fact, according to a study ordered by Reagan's successor, Governor Brown (a study Reagan cited as authoritative when it came to the parts that suited him politically), the Community Work Experience Program "failed to meet any of its employment objects."

And yet somehow in Ronald Reagan's hands this became a social

policy miracle of loaves-and-fishes proportions. On the radio in the middle of 1975 he claimed that "in the 35 counties where it was tried, 25 percent more welfare recipients moved off welfare into jobs than in the state's other 23 counties." Why the statistical discrepancy? Because, he said, "thousands who refused to report were automatically dropped from the welfare rolls and not heard from again"—which didn't explain why there were more welfare case in counties with the program than those without. In fact, what he said made no sense at all.

Governing is not a hero's profession. It is a profession of compromises. Those pesky bureaucrats, always getting in the way with their infernal statistics; those issues whose incommensurate complexities don't allow for Manichaean interpretation; the watchdogs of the press pointing out the contradictions. On the radio, though, when he was telling stories, no such compromises were necessary. Issues could be made to be Manichaean. The statistics were his to superintend. Now the only thing he was accountable for was rhetoric. Gerald Ford, however, enjoyed no such luxury.

RELUCTANTLY, AFTER CLAIMING AROUND THANKSGIVING THAT "OUR country is not in an economic crisis," the president finally admitted it was. "I've got bad news," he said in his State of the Union address, "and I don't expect much, if any applause." His proposal that night for $16 billion in temporary individual and corporate taxes cuts, which he thought of as a pragmatic reversal from his previous call for a tax hike, was dismissed as halfhearted by Democrats in Congress, who responded with a bill cutting taxes permanently by $22.9 billion. His right-wing Treasury secretary William Simon counseled a veto. Another economic advisor, Alan Greenspan, pointed out that a veto would represent Ford's second reversal on basic questions of fiscal policy in only a few months. The press found out about the internal dispute. Successful presidencies manage to contain such palace politics. But regarding the Ford White House, Robert Novak later reflected, "More than any other president, struggles for power were leaked to reporters." This one was resolved in favor of Greenspan—with the president vowing to kill all new spending programs that might add to the deficit. At which he was damned again, this time by the left.

That was nothing compared with the blows from his right. Young Americans for Freedom, calling the tax cut "not enough," announced a mobilization for taxpayers to staple tea bags to their tax returns. Reagan, on the radio in February, said the $52 billion deficit written into Ford's

new budget proposal "abandoned his pledge of a balanced budget . . . made little more than four months ago" and required "borrowing on a scale too colossal to comprehend," and also said that the debate in Washington now was not on "whether the federal government must learn to live within its means, but how profligate and irresponsible a government can be without either debauching the currency, squeezing business and consumers out of the money market, and heading toward . . . literal bankruptcy."

And nothing compared to the abuse he now got from the press. The *New Republic*'s John Osborne wrote prior to the State of the Union address, "Gerald Ford is an awfully nice man who isn't up to the presidency." Tom Brokaw of NBC interviewed the president afterward and asked him "a question that isn't easy to phrase, so I will just bore straight ahead with it. As you know, I'm certain, because I have been told that you have commented on this before, but it has been speculated on in print not only in Washington but elsewhere and it crops up in conversations from time to time in this town" (perhaps he was thinking of Lyndon Johnson's oft-repeated bon mot: that Jerry Ford couldn't fart and chew gum at the same time): "the question of whether or not you are intellectually up to the job of being president."

Ford responded by pointing to his college grades—so reporters clamored for the White House to provide his transcripts. Suspicious times, these. Two dozen Republican conservatives soon announced they wouldn't back a primary challenger to the president—"at this time." Though Charles Percy, the liberal Republican senator from Illinois, was making explorations.

In March Ford signed the tax bill, including a $29.2 billion tax cut inserted by the Democrats, calling it the most difficult decision in his life—and had to admit on TV that "the tax cuts in the bill I have just signed and other changes will bring the estimated fiscal year 1976 deficit up to approximately $60 billion," perhaps $100 billion if the "new spending actions which committees of the Congress were already seriously considering" were allowed to prevail.

Damned if he did, damned if he didn't. Reflected a historian, "In what became a familiar pattern, Ford's efforts to unite the country around what he considered reasonable proposals succeeded chiefly in enraging and emboldening his political adversaries. . . . Each time Ford charged course, he looked less like a shrewd pragmatist or a man with the courage to change his mind than a confused flip-flopper." Ronald Reagan would have just blithely denied that he had changed course.

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GOVERNING IN A WORLD GONE MAD: On January 24, crazed Puerto Rican nationalists bombed a historic tavern in Manhattan's financial district where George Washington had delivered his farewell address to his troops; the Weather Underground staged near-simultaneous blasts at the State Department in Washington, D.C., and an Army induction center in the Oakland federal building. Its communiqué blamed President Ford's request for $522 million in military aid to help South Vietnam stave off a Communist takeover. For his part, Ronald Reagan blamed the terror spree on the dissolving over the past few years of the House Committee on Internal Security, the successor to HUAC; the Internal Security Division of the Justice Department; and the Subversive Activities Control Board—actions taken by Congress, he said, in response to the "howls of complaint from a smorgasbord of Communist sympathizers" like Congressman John Conyers of Michigan, "who has backed causes such as the National Peace Action Committee, which was one of those identified as a Trotskyite front by the very House committee that's being abolished."

In February a slasher roamed the streets of Los Angeles, randomly slitting the throats of victims (but only, curiously, on Wednesdays and weekends). Two radical economists at the Institute of Policy Studies pegged the probability of a 1930s-style depression at 60 percent by 1978, thanks to multinational corporations "beyond the reach of traditional government controls."

On, say, March 15, to take a random day, you could open a paper like the *Milwaukee Journal* and survey a cabinet of horrors just by flipping the pages: a Purdue University coed kidnapped by an assistant professor and held for three weeks "in an apparent experiment to brainwash her into falling in love"; thousands fleeing their riverbank homes after tornadoes across Arkansas and Florida and South Carolina; a former governor of Oklahoma convicted of bribery and extortion; the assassination by police in Saigon (where our embassy still supported hundreds of diplomatic personnel) of a French journalist who had criticized the South Vietnamese government; Rabbi Korff raising money for a cash-strapped Richard Nixon ("He has not been accustomed to economizing"); fresh leads in Pennsylvania in the twelfth month of the manhunt for Patty Hearst and her associates; a hijacking in Ethiopia; a fourteen-year-old from Brooklyn who showed up at a bus station in Omaha, Nebraska, carrying a note reading, "To whom it may concern, I'm Michael's grandmother, and am sending Michael to Boys Town because I don't want him to be here in this awful crime city"; another kidnapped millionaire

scion in Italy; a knife-wielding purse-snatcher menacing old women on the streets of Milwaukee—he was only seventeen.

Horrors, of course, drench the news in any decade. By the middle of the 1970s, however, the perception of the density of horrors was so much worse. For instance, the BBC's Alistair Cooke gave a speech as a guest of the House of Representatives in which he declared that "crime and violence in the cities has become greater than at any time since the fifteenth century."

IN WASHINGTON, THE PARANOIA AND DREAD INFECTING THE NATION were finding their institutional expression in the Senate and House investigations of the FBI and CIA. The *New York Times* predicted on February 8 a "Year of Intelligence"—"a thorough and potentially far-reaching review of United States intelligence practices and requirements." Speaking before a friendly House subcommittee on February 20, CIA director William E. Colby begged Congress to move forward in a "sober and responsible manner," said that overmuch criticism "placed American intelligence in danger," and worried that the outcry "raised the question whether secret intelligence operations can be conducted by the United States." Then he acknowledged one of those secret intelligence operations, recently revealed in the news: that among the dissidents on whom the CIA had kept files were four members of Congress who had the temerity to attend antiwar demonstrations.

That was over, he insisted: members of Congress were "not under surveillance." But he added: "active surveillance."

Colby refused to turn over details on his agency budget, customarily hidden within the budgets of the State and Defense departments; he refused to release the CIA's fifty-page report on Seymour Hersh's December 22 exposé; he pleaded that though "there may have been occasions when CIA may have exceeded its proper bounds," any "missteps by CIA were few and far between, have been corrected, and in no way justify the outcry which has been raised."

Eight days later Daniel Schorr, CBS's curmudgeonly attack-dog investigative reporter, broke this news: "President Ford reportedly warned associates that if current investigations go too far, they could uncover several assassinations of foreign officials in which the CIA was involved."

The details, Schorr said, were "closely held." But the best estimates were that three or more such operations took place in the late 1950s or early 1960s. He concluded with a sardonic fillip: "Colby is on the record saying, 'I think that family skeletons are best left where they are—in the closet.' He apparently had some literal skeletons in mind."

The claim had taken a labyrinthine course to revelation. It came out of a meeting between President Ford and a group from the *New York Times*—seven top editors and columnists, and publisher Arthur Sulzberger—before the State of the Union. Ford got to work explaining away the embarrassment of offering a tax cut months after proposing a tax increase. Managing editor Abe Rosenthal changed the subject to the Rockefeller Commission, pushing a politer version of the *Times* editors' objection that no real investigation should ever have been entrusted to such a crew of establishment mandarins. Ford came back saying that he had chosen the members precisely for their "responsibility"—because when he became president he had learned things about the CIA to "blacken the name of every President back to Truman," and for the investigators to handle it irresponsibly would "ruin the U.S. image around the world."

Tom Wicker later wrote about what happened next: "At some point in this monologue, Ford had used the word 'assassinations,' and this clearly seemed to be the dark secret in mind." Wicker hadn't been entirely shocked, remembering a sojourn at the LBJ Ranch in January 1964 when Johnson, the new president, as if processing a psychological burden, recalled to a group of reporters his shock upon learning of the CIA's complicity in the coup-murders of Rafael Trujillo of the Dominican Republic and Ngo Dinh Diem of South Vietnam. But 1964, Wicker reflected, had been a "different world." "Then it had not occurred to me that we should print such things; when my colleague Doug Kiker of the *New York Times* and Phil Potter of the *Baltimore Sun* and I later made notes—which I still have—of Johnson's conversation, we carefully entered a cryptic note ('Trujillo and Diem') for that part of it, lest the notes fall into irresponsible hands." Now, however, eleven years later, a reckoning was at hand, and the group had to make an ethical decision on the fly, at a time when the grounds for judgment were shifting beneath their feet. Should they publish?

The group racked their brains over whether the entire session had been demarcated by Ron Nessen, the president's press secretary, as "off the record." Wicker, recalling that Ford had specified at one or two points that they were off the record—but not at this point—offered that he might have leaked out the information on purpose, at least as an investigatory lead. Columnist Wicker was by then a dean of Washington's suspicious circles: author of column after column during the past

several years, on Vietnam, on Watergate, on all manner of official abuses, exposing lies, blasting the cult of executive secrecy that enabled the lies, decrying the very longing for national innocence that let hypocritical presidents hiding beneath the cover of "national security" get away with all manner of unpatriotic perfidies in the first place—and seeing suspicion vindicated nearly every time. "By 1975," he remembered, "I thought it intolerable that American government should sponsor such criminal and indefensible acts as political assassinations, and I saw no reason why the *New York Times* should protect Ford against his own disclosures. . . . If the people had a right to know anything, surely they had a right to know murder was being done in their name." His bosses, however, more reticent, asked Nessen whether the remarks had been intended to be off the record. Nessen, aghast, said that of course they had been off the record. At that, Sulzberger scotched further inquiry. The frustrated *Times*men who disagreed leaked word of the debate, which was how word got back to Schorr—who managed to secure an interview with Director Colby.

"Are you people involved in assassinations?" asked Schorr, as coolly as possible.

"Not anymore," replied Colby, explaining that planning assassinations had been banned since 1973.

Schorr asked who'd been the targets prior to then. Colby said, "I can't talk about it." Schorr named the United Nations secretary-general who perished in a 1961 plane crash: "Hammarskjöld?"

"Of course not."

"Lumumba?"—the leftist liberator of the Congo, also killed in 1961.

"I can't go down a list with you. Sorry."

That, as all the Watergate buffs knew who'd read *All the President's Men* (which was just then being knocked off the *New York Times* best-seller list in its thirty-fourth week by Dan Rather's study of the Nixon White House, *The Palace Guard*), was a "non-denial denial." Schorr's producers gave him two minutes on the air to run with the story—a long segment for a piece without any visual component.

Although, at that, it had to be noted that the *Washington Post* had put Schorr's scoop only on page three of the paper. The *Times* buried it on page thirty. *Time* magazine didn't acknowledge it, and put off even mentioning the CIA probes until seventeen days later, a week after Vice President Rockefeller extended his commission's April deadline so it could look into the alleged assassination plots. "We have entered the decade," *Time* quoted Senator Church as saying, "that ends with 1984." *Time* then asked him if the CIA's alleged murders of foreign heads of

state could ever be justified. "In the absence of war," he responded, no government agency can be given license to murder. "The President is not a glorified Godfather."

President Ford was soon to begin negotiations with Senator Church about what secret documents his committee would be allowed to access. Ford surely had reason to panic: would he choose the "instincts of openness and candor" to which he pledged his administration the previous August; or the deference to the Cold War cult of executive authority that had defined his thirteen congressional terms—especially now that he was the executive whose authority he would be protecting?

Presently, however, his executive attention was distracted by another intelligence consideration. "The Ford Administration, clearly taken unawares by the turn of events in Vietnam, concentrated yesterday on blaming Congress for the collapse of South Vietnamese resistance in nearly two-thirds of that country," the *Los Angeles Times* reported on March 20. "Privately, intelligence specialists conceded that a major countrywide thrust by Hanoi was not expected this year."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

"Disease, Disease, Disease"

IT ALL HAPPENED SO SHOCKINGLY FAST. AT THE BEGINNING OF THE YEAR the North Vietnamese Communists captured the South Vietnamese province of Phuoc Long on the Cambodian border, seventy-five miles from Saigon. The media called it an isolated fight. But then, early in March, the Communists captured the Central Highlands city of Ban Me Thuot, and South Vietnam's President Thieu began a slow, soiling surrender. First he gave up the northern provinces. Then the entire Central Highlands, cutting his country in two. Instead of the orderly retreat of a disciplined army, "there's a complete lack of communication, a breakdown in the chain of command," an American intelligence officer explained, describing the chaotic rout of this army to which Americans had pledged their lives, their fortune, and their sacred honor. "Colonels aren't following orders. No one cares. It's become every man for himself."

The North Vietnamese politburo had planned the full-on offensive to win the war to take two years. Instead, it was taking a few months. One and a half million refugees poured south to coastal cities they were told were impregnable to the enemy—"from one end of a sinking ship to another," wrote the *New Yorker*'s Jonathan Schell—endless columns of women and children, old men in conical hats, clogging dusty roads to the sea. Along these roads civilians were massacred—not by their ostensible enemy, but by South Vietnamese soldiers, driven by directionless rage. A country, Schell wrote, "tearing itself apart in a frenzy of self-destruction."

Other refugees boarded literal ships—"crowding together," NBC News reported, "without food, without water, starving, dying on the slow voyage south." Children falling overboard, mothers diving after them; people being thrown overboard, by soldiers desperate to flee themselves—scorpions-in-bottle scrambles for scarce resources. Soldiers shed uniforms—but not weapons—and swam desperately for American ships meant to evacuate civilians. They commandeered boats, waging

makeshift naval battles against other soldiers. One of these mariners turned out to be the region's military commander, who fought his way to a rescue ship as his former soldiers crashed through the city, firing randomly at passersby.

Vessels arrived at their intended destinations, coastal cities like Qui Nhon, Tuy Hoa, and Nha Trang; desperate passengers discovered that these "safe havens" had already been abandoned to the Communists. Da Nang was the nation's second-largest city, formerly home to the mighty United States air base, once the busiest airport in the world. A great battle was supposedly under way to save the beachside metropolis. Lazy American reporters deployed the usual clichés to describe the fighting: "juggernaut," "blitzkrieg." A skeptical writer, though, quoted a French observer on the scene: "There never was a last battle for Da Nang." Another eyewitness broadened the description: "There is no war." South Vietnam was already lost.

On March 28, South Vietnamese marines clambered aboard the last ship to depart the city, the USS *Pioneer Commander*, and slaughtered twenty-five civilians. All told, there were four thousand passengers aboard—but only a few barrels of water. "One woman's baby had died in her arms while she waited on a barge for four days without water or shelter," read an Associated Press dispatch. "She became hysterical as she came aboard the freighter and leaped overboard."

There were airplanes for the refugees, too. But only three civilians made it aboard the last one to lift off. The rest of the passengers were members of the South Vietnamese 1st Division's Hac Bao, or "Black Panther," unit, who fought their way aboard by opening fire into the waiting crowd. Not every member of the Black Panther unit made it, however, for when the plane landed in Saigon, a mangled body, M-16 rifle still strapped to his shoulder, was found dangling from the fuselage. Others dropped from wheel wells from thousands of feet. Another plane, lifting off south of Ban Me Thuot, was barely able to ascend after a grenade went off under one of the wings. At the South China Sea port of Cam Ranh Bay, amid the Vietnamese marines aiming grenades and rifle fire at both civilians and their very own officers, a helicopter carrying President Ford's personal photographer, part of a White House observational mission, was shot at. He told the *New York Times*, "We decided not to make any more passes over the ship."

THE GRISLY DETAILS FROM THE USS *PIONEER COMMANDER*, THE CHAOTIC last flight out of Da Nang, and other such stories did not run in all too many newspapers, which reserved space for news of, Operation

Babylift, instead. "Their eyes wide with wonder and showing no ill effects from a 25 hour dash across the Pacific from endangered Saigon, 55 Vietnamese orphans have arrived to a new life in the United States," ran the front-page article on April 3 in the *Toledo Blade*, complete with photo of two darling sleeping infants. Americans couldn't get enough news, either, about the young man who organized Operation Babylift. Ed Daley, president of World Airways, was "gregarious, an outgoing, good party guy who will gather up a planeload of friends and fly off to Europe for a weekend," ran one profile ("TOUGH AIRLINE CHIEF LIKES CHILDREN; SENDS THOUSANDS TO CIRCUS, SYMPHONY"). On an impulse, he had flown one of his company's 727s to Da Nang, hoping to help organize evacuations. He arrived only in time for that last planeload, the one overrun by the ARVN 1st Division. Throwing punches, crying "One at a time, one at a time, there's room for everybody"—and then, his clothes finally ripped to shreds, firing a pistol in the air—Daley was forced to stand by helplessly as the taxiing plane ran over people on the runway. Unbowed, he pressed south on to Saigon, confident his American ingenuity would find a way to redeem the debacle. He had conceived a plan, and a slogan worthy of an advertising man: Operation Babylift. "Unable to do anything else in Vietnam," Schell wrote, "the United States was now making off with planeloads of Vietnamese babies." As freed POWs would redeem the debacle in 1973, rescuing orphans would redeem it now.

And so on April 3, the news was filled with smiling prospective parents, accounts of Daley's defiance in continuing the operation even after the Federal Aviation Administration threatened to throw the book at him, and with testimony about jammed State Department and charity phone lines following the merest rumor of his plans: "We had big responses from the American public when the Hungarians and Czechs and Cubans had their crises, but this has been the biggest response in my thirty years' experience," said a relief specialist from the U.S. Catholic Conference.

Then, two days later, on April 5, the news was this: "Grim workers resumed their search today for more bodies of Vietnamese war orphans killed Friday when a huge U.S. jetliner en route to the United States crashed in a rice paddy."

The search continued as a special section of *Time* now on the newsstands asked, "Is This What America Has Left?" The *Economist*'s cover, "The Fading of America," pronounced, "The Indochina rout will now make every ally of the United States doubt whether it can believe in the promises of American support." British Petroleum and Gulf finalized the sale of their holdings in Kuwait to the government there. The two Western companies had asked a price of $2 billion. They were paid one-fortieth of that. A leader of West Germany's Christian Democrats worried, "If Berlin were attacked tomorrow I am not absolutely certain that the United States would intervene." According to a new poll, only 34 percent of Americans would favor helping West Germany in the event of an invasion, and only 27 percent would want to help Israel.

PRESIDENT FORD, WHATEVER THE FATE OF HIS PERSONAL PHOTOGRAPHER, was still confident the rout could be reversed.

On January 9, Ron Nessen had announced that the president wanted military aid for Vietnam above the $700 million Congress had already authorized for the fiscal year. It was one of the other things that shocked Tom Wicker at the White House meeting between Ford and his *Times* colleagues: the president's brassy conviction that a few hundred million more might just turn this thing around. "Some note in his remarks even suggested to me," he recalled, "the insane possibility of the return of American troops." Only 12 percent of the public in the second week of February thought the United States should send more aid; in mid-March two liberal senators, Republican Charles "Mac" Mathias of Maryland and Democrat Adlai Stevenson III of Illinois, introduced legislation to cut off help to Southeast Asia altogether. Senator Frank Church, for his part, asked, "We have so much blood on our hands out there. Why do we thirst for more?" On March 28 the president sent Army Chief of Staff Fred Weyand to South Vietnam to assess the situation. The conclusions he brought back were simultaneously realistic and fantastical.

Realistic: "The current military situation is critical, and the probability of the survival of South Vietnam as a truncated nation in the southern provinces is marginal at best."

Fantastical: An emergency congressional appropriation of $722 million would be all it would take to save the day.

Nessen announced an April 10 presidential foreign policy speech to a joint session of Congress. In the interim, following a golf date with Bob Hope in Palm Springs and a dinner with Ronald Reagan (who "has been critical of Mr. Ford's policies as President," the *New York Times* explained, "and is being promoted as a possible candidate for President in 1976, even though both he and the President are Republicans and Mr. Ford has announced his intention to seek a Presidential term in his own right"), a reporter at the airport asked Ford what he was doing about the military losses in Southeast Asia. The president "laughed playfully," as the *New Yorker* reported it, "and broke into a run."

How droll: America, the country that ran away.

In a speech to a San Francisco civic organization he deployed the death of the babies to advance what some saw as a message of reconciliation—and others saw as an invitation to civic amnesia: "In this hour of sadness and, I am sure, frustration, let us not dispel our energies with recrimination or assessments of blame. The facts, whatever they may be, will speak for themselves, and historians will have plenty of time to judge later on. What is now essential is that we maintain our balance as a nation and as people and that we maintain our unity as a powerful but peace-loving nation." He added a political fillip, however: "This obviously is not the point in history to dismantle our defenses, nor can we adopt such a naive view of the world that we cripple our vital intelligence agencies."

And that was not a unifying notion at all. Among those who might not agree were the voters of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

Late in 1974 a director named Peter Davis showed a documentary called *Hearts and Minds* briefly in a Los Angeles theater to qualify it for Academy Award consideration. It opened with an Operation Homecoming parade for POW George Thomas Coker, who told a crowd on the steps of the Linden, New Jersey, city hall about Vietnam, "If it wasn't for the people, it was very pretty. The people there are very backwards and primitive and they make a mess out of everything." General William Westmoreland, commander of U.S. forces, in a comment the director explained had not been spontaneous but had been repeated on three takes, was shown explaining, "The Oriental doesn't put the same high price on life as does a Westerner. Life is plentiful. Life is cheap in the Orient." (Thereupon, the film cut to a sobbing Vietnamese mother being restrained from climbing into the grave atop the coffin of her son.) Daniel Ellsberg was quoted: "We aren't on the wrong side. We are the wrong side." The movie concluded with an interview with an activist from Vietnam Veterans Against the War. "We've all tried very hard to escape what we have learned in Vietnam," he said. "I think Americans have worked extremely hard not to see the criminalities that their officials and their policy-makers exhibited."

A massive thunderstorm raged outside at the Oscar ceremony at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion on April 8, 1975—where after Sammy Davis Jr.'s musical tribute to Fred Astaire, and Ingrid Bergman's acceptance of the Best Supporting Actress Award for *Murder on the Orient Express*, and Francis Ford Coppola's award for best director (one of six Oscars for *The Godfather: Part II:* "I'm wearing a tuxedo with a bulletproof cummerbund," cohost Bob Hope cracked, "Who knows what will happen if Al Pacino doesn't win"), Lauren Hutton and Danny Thomas opened the envelope and announced that *Hearts and Minds* had won as the year's best documentary.

Producer Bert Schneider took the microphone and said, "It's ironic that we're here at a time just before Vietnam is about to be liberated." Then he read a telegram from the head of the North Vietnamese delegation to the Paris peace talks. It thanked the antiwar movement "for all they have done on behalf of peace. . . . Greetings of friendship to all American people."

Backstage, Bob Hope was so enraged he tried to push his way past the broadcast's producer to issue an onstage rebuttal. Shirley MacLaine, who had already mocked Sammy Davis from the stage for having endorsed Richard Nixon's reelection, shouted, "Don't you dare." Anguished telegrams from viewers began piling up backstage. One, from a retired Army colonel, read, "WITH 55,000 DEAD YOUNG AMERICANS IN DEFENSE OF FREEDOM AND MILLIONS OF VIETNAMESE FIGHTING FOR FREEDOM . . . DEMAND WITHDRAWAL OF AWARD." On the back of that particular wire, Hope madly scribbled something for his cohost Frank Sinatra to read during his next turn on camera—which he did, to a mix of boos and applause: "The Academy is saying we are not responsible for any political utterances on this program and we are sorry that had to take place." Upon which, backstage, the broadcast's third cohost, Shirley MacLaine, berated Sinatra: "You said you were speaking for the Academy. Well, I'm a member of the Academy and you didn't ask me!" Her brother, Warren Beatty, snarled at Sinatra on camera: "Thank you, Frank, you old Republican."

Two nights later, in a haunting, haunted performance full of awkward pauses and applause lines that yielded no applause, the president told Congress that "to build upon our many successes, to repair damage where we find it, to recover our balance, to move ahead as a united people," it should vote $722 million in military assistance for South Vietnam and $250 million for humanitarian and economic aid. (Two Democratic freshmen and Phil Burton walked out.) "Let us put an end to self-inflicted wounds," he said, his Midwestern voice sounding flatter than ever. "Let us remember that our national unity is a most priceless asset. Let us deny our adversaries the satisfaction of using Vietnam to pit Americans against Americans. At this moment, the United States must present to the world a united front."

And then he absorbed the unmistakable fact that the public was

already united—against giving Vietnam anything at all. Gallup found that the public opposed humanitarian aid by a margin of 55 percent to 40 percent and military aid by 79 percent to 15. The respondents opposed letting evacuated South Vietnamese live here by 52 percent to 36 percent. Even, apparently, infants: in San Francisco's Presidio district, a warehouse providing temporary housing for the orphans of Operation Babylift (which angry South Vietnamese, Swiss aide workers reported, were now calling "an abduction of children") was under armed military guard after threats to their safety.

The most hawkish Democratic senator, Henry M. "Scoop" Jackson, said he opposed military aid, too, and added, "I don't know of any on the Democratic side who will support it." The Appropriations Committee chair, John McClellan of Arkansas, another hawk, said it would only "prolong the conflict and perhaps postpone the inevitable—a Communist victory, a complete takeover." A Republican dove, Senator Mark Hatfield of Oregon, said, "I am appalled that a man would continue in such a bankrupt policy"—and the most infamous Republican hawk of all, Barry Goldwater, had already announced, a year earlier, "We can scratch South Vietnam. It is imminent that South Vietnam is going to fall into the hands of North Vietnam." You could not reasonably see this as an ideological or partisan choice. But in the future, it would be interpreted by cynical and opportunistic critics as precisely that.

On April 14, the secretaries of state and defense met with Senate leaders to press the case for the appropriations, and to discuss details of the impending likely evacuation of all American personnel from Saigon—and, the president hoped, of thousands of loyal South Vietnamese. Henry Kissinger cited a million as the upward range of the South Vietnamese who would need rescuing, 174,000 as the low number. A mission sent by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee had just returned from Vietnam and reported it might be too late even to safely evacuate Americans. In the private meeting with the secretaries of state and defense, a skeptical Senator Claiborne Pell of Rhode Island said that perhaps the nation of Borneo would welcome refugees: "It has the same latitude, the same climate, and would welcome some anti-Communists."

They were only responding to the will of their constituents. In conservative St. Petersburg, Florida, the newspaper printed readers' responses to a survey. They opposed humanitarian aid 695 to 361 and military aid 1,010 to 65. "I can never understand why our government is always so willing to rush great quantities of materials and equipment to most foreign countries for aid, but when our own people need aid it becomes so hard to come by," one reader wrote.

"When you read what those Vietnamese men did to women and children being rescued, think who would get the food and other aid," wrote another. "If Mr. Ford has millions of dollars to squander on a hopeless cause, he could use it to curb crime . . . here at home."

"Let's stop this once and for all and quit playing on the sympathies of United States citizens."

"It would seem that President Ford has become bereft of his senses. . . . What about the billion dollars' worth of armaments that the South Vietnamese army walked (or ran) away from and which fell into the North Vietnamese's hands?"

Congress voted only the $200 million for humanitarian aid. The House vote against military aid included fifty Republicans. Ford promptly told Congress that it was responsible for the "loss of Vietnam"—not, say, a South Vietnamese army whose officers abandoned their troops to slaughter infant civilians. He claimed that "just a relatively small American commitment" could have met "any military challenges." (He lied. The Pentagon's estimate of what it called an "austere program" to save Saigon had been $1.4 billion at a minimum.) Senators, for their part, saved face by describing how Nixon had gulled them—writing "secret agreements" into the Paris Peace Accords promising future military assistance he had no authority to give.

Two branches of government, hurling recrimination at one another, accusations almost unto treason.

To the west, the capital of Cambodia fell to a fearsome Communist agglomeration known as the Khmer Rouge. This was not bad news, the *Los Angeles Times* editorialized, "for the suffering Cambodians themselves." The *New York Times*' correspondent there, Sydney H. Schanberg, published a reflection amid the collapse noting the "million Cambodians killed or wounded (one seventh of the population), hundreds of thousands of refugees living in shanties, a devastated countryside, children dying of starvation and carpenters turning out a steady stream of coffins made from ammunition crates." It was headlined "INDOCHINA WITHOUT AMERICANS: FOR MOST, A BETTER LIFE." However, within three days, watching the horrors already unfolding under Khmer Rouge rule, Schanberg wrote that he was changing his mind: it was already evident that the Khmer Rouge were beginning a genocide of millions of their countrymen in a lunatic bid to radically engineer an agrarian society without banks, religion, or indeed any modern technology whatsoever, beginning with the purging of intellectuals, businessmen, Buddhists, and foreigners—the establishment of a Communist "Year Zero." "Everyone had felt that when the Communists came and

the war finally ended, at least the suffering would largely be over. All of us were wrong."

The North Vietnamese invasion force continued its waltz southward. The *Washington Post* columnist Tom Braden quoted an off-the-record remark of Henry Kissinger that "the United States must carry out some act somewhere in the world which shows its determination to continue to be a world power." On April 21, President Thieu appeared on South Vietnamese TV and resigned his office in a lachrymose, ninety-minute performance, citing Richard Nixon's broken promises of a "full force" if North Vietnam broke the cease-fire. The next day his former government's mighty air base at Bien Hoa, where Bob Hope used to broadcast USO shows at Christmastime, fell to the Communists. The day after that, President Ford told graduates assembled in the Tulane University field house, "Today America can regain the sense of pride that existed before. But it cannot be achieved by refighting a war that is finished as far as America is concerned."

Among those who disagreed—who wished to dwell on Vietnam as a national teachable moment—was a writer in the "Notes and Comments" section of the *New Yorker*, who said, "Our noble commitments, our firm stands, our global responsibilities—how frequently, in recent years, have they served as a cover for self-interest and greed, then as sunglasses against the flames?" And the editors of the liberal weekly the *New Republic*, who observed that this was the week of the two hundredth anniversary of the Battle of Lexington and Concord. "If the Bicentennial helps us focus on the contrast between our idealism and our crimes, so much the better." A contributor in the same issue opined that North Vietnam "is one of the several among the poorest nations in the world that have tried or will try to create a collectivist society, based on principles that are repugnant to us, yet are likely to produce greater welfare and security for its people than any local alternative ever offered, at a cost in freedom that affects [only] a small elite."

And now the revolutionaries would have their chance, in South Vietnam and North Vietnam both—or, as it was soon simply to be known, just "Vietnam."

ON APRIL 28, THE ROCKEFELLER COMMISSION CALLED FORMER CENTRAL Intelligence Agency chief Richard Helms back from his posting as ambassador to Iran to testify about the allegations of CIA assassinations. Eighteen days earlier, President Ford, in his speech asking for Vietnam aid, had said, "The Central Intelligence Agency has been of maximum

importance to me. The Central Intelligence Agency and its associated intelligence organizations could be of maximum importance to some of you in this audience who might be President at some later date. I think it would be catastrophic for the Congress or anyone else to destroy the usefulness by dismantling, in effect, our intelligence systems upon which we rest so heavily."

Daniel Schorr confronted Helms on his way out of the hearing room: "Welcome back"

"You cocksucker!" Helms replied. "'Killer Schorr'—that's what they ought to call you!"

The cameras started rolling; Helms was hardly more civil. "I must say, Mr. Schorr, I didn't like what you had to say on some of your broadcasts on the subject. I don't think it was fair, and I don't think it was right. As far as I know, the CIA was never responsible for assassinating any foreign leaders."

Another reporter followed up: had he ever discussed assassinations?

Helms raised his voice: "I don't know whether I've stopped beating my wife, whether you've stopped beating your wife. In government, there are discussions of practically everything under the sun."

"Of assassinations?"

"Of everything."

That same day in Saigon, where the CIA may or may not have assassinated South Vietnamese president Ngo Dinh Diem in 1963, Tan Son Nhut Air Base fell to the Communists. Its fall was hastened by an attack by South Vietnamese troops who, rather than defend the base from their erstwhile enemy, stole a small armada of airplanes themselves.

That was the coup de grâce. The next morning, at six thirty, Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger announced, "The President ordered the final withdrawal of the Americans from Vietnam at approximately 11:00 last night on the advice of the ambassador and subsequent to the closing of Tan Son Nhut making it necessary to go to a helicopter air lift."

The evacuation was dubbed "Operation Frequent Wind"—like a reference to flatulence, like something out of *M*A*S*H*. It was desperate, sordid, unplanned. The American consul general, after all, had been going around town announcing, "Saigon is as sound as the American dollar." (But how sound was that? Inflation was 9.2 percent.) The ambassador's wife resolutely refused to pack.

And Americans, once the film cans were flown back to New York, got to see on TV how it had all gone down.

John Chancellor, opening NBC's evening news broadcast on

April 30: "Good evening. The city of Saigon was renamed today. Victorious Communists who forced the city's surrender said that henceforth the city will be known as 'Ho Chi Minh City.'"

A Soviet-made Vietcong tank was shown crashing through the gate of the presidential palace, a Communist soldier scrambling down the nose, running a National Liberation Front flag across the lawn.

The choppers evacuating Americans maneuvered in zigs and zags, the better to dodge heat-seeking missiles in their seventeen-minute flights to the ships massed in the South China Sea—and to dodge American helicopters commandeered by enemy pilots trying to shoot Americans down. Other helicopters were commandeered by deserters. On the deck of the USS *Blue Ridge* one landed without permission, tangling in the rotor blades of an evacuation chopper. The mightiest nation in the world, unable to control access to its own warships; American authorities finally decided to simply let the deserters board, to class them as refugees. Aboard the *Blue Ridge*, the surplus helicopters were simply pushed overboard, useless military hardware, buried at sea.

The penultimate segment of the previous evenings NBC's newscast had been an editorial from the network's stern house commentator, David Brinkley, broadcast, incongruously, from outdoors:

"The United States did not lose the war since it never really tried to win it, instead trying to help South Vietnam win the war, and finding it would not, or could not; and though the United States did not lose the war, it did lose a great deal. The money, we know about; the inflation, we still live with; the social discords in this country are still to be seen. The other loss we also know about, though we don't talk about it much—"

The camera pulled back, zooming wide, revealing that he was standing in the middle of an endless sea of white tombstones.

"Fifty-six thousand lives, plus about 160,000 seriously wounded, many of whom will never recover. So when some future politician for some reason feels the need to drag this country into a war, he might come to Arlington, and stand maybe right over there somewhere"—he pointed off into the distance, then pulled his hands tight across himself—"to make his announcement and tell what he has in mind. If he can attract public support, speaking from a place like this, then his reasons for starting a war will have to have been good ones."

Then, also incongruously, another editorial followed, from the broadcast's anchor, offering the opposite interpretation. "The American people gave up on Vietnam without telling Vietnam," John Chancellor said, and the image on-screen was a clutch of hip young long-haired

men in silken shirts and bell-bottoms, watching TV—as if standing in for a morally dissolute nation that no longer knew how to keep its word. "It didn't dawn on the Vietnamese people that the guarantees were withdrawn until they saw that the United States was not going to help get it back, or even help keep what was left. They did not."

The next night, Brinkley gave another editorial:

"Perhaps in the way the war was ending was explained why it was ending as it did. . . . The North was willing and able to fight. In the South they were desperately trying to abandon their own country. . . ."

And once more John Chancellor from his anchor desk told the opposite story: "During yesterday's Saigon evacuation, a sizable number of South Vietnamese hoped to be rescued from rooftops by American copters, but they weren't. South Vietnamese had hope because they were taught the United States would aid if South Vietnam were in trouble—but the United States did not."

In the *New York Times*, across the entire front page, was the headline: MINH SURRENDERS, VIETCONG IN SAIGON; 1,000 AMERICANS AND 5,500 VIETNAMESE EVACUATED BY COPTERS TO U.S. CARRIERS. Below that, an indelible image: a line of bodies snaking up a ladder to a precipitous shack atop the CIA station chief's residence, the embassy grounds having been commandeered by what Henry Kissinger had once confidently dismissed as a "fourth-rate military power," now far too dangerous for helicopters to lift off from. "Ford Unity Plea," another front-page headline read. But that fantasy could not be sustained even within the confines of a single network newscast. This hell, these scenes out of Hieronymus Bosch, this place people were risking death in order to leave, for which we had sacrificed fifty-six thousand soldiers and half a trillion dollars in national treasure, dividing our nation in half: this is what our investment produced?

SOME OF THE SOUTH VIETNAMESE WHO MADE IT TO THE UNITED STATES were preliminarily resettled at Eglin Air Force Base in the Florida panhandle—in defiance of a hastily assembled petition got up by residents of the base's host city, which was called Niceville. A radio poll that found 80 percent of Niceville's residents didn't want them. The Associated press reported, "Children in one school joked about shooting a few." High school kids spoke in class of plans to organize a "Gook Klux Klan." Students in a twelfth-grade psychology class told their teacher they were worried the refugees would try to convert them to Communism.

"Disease, disease, disease, that's all I've heard," complained a con-